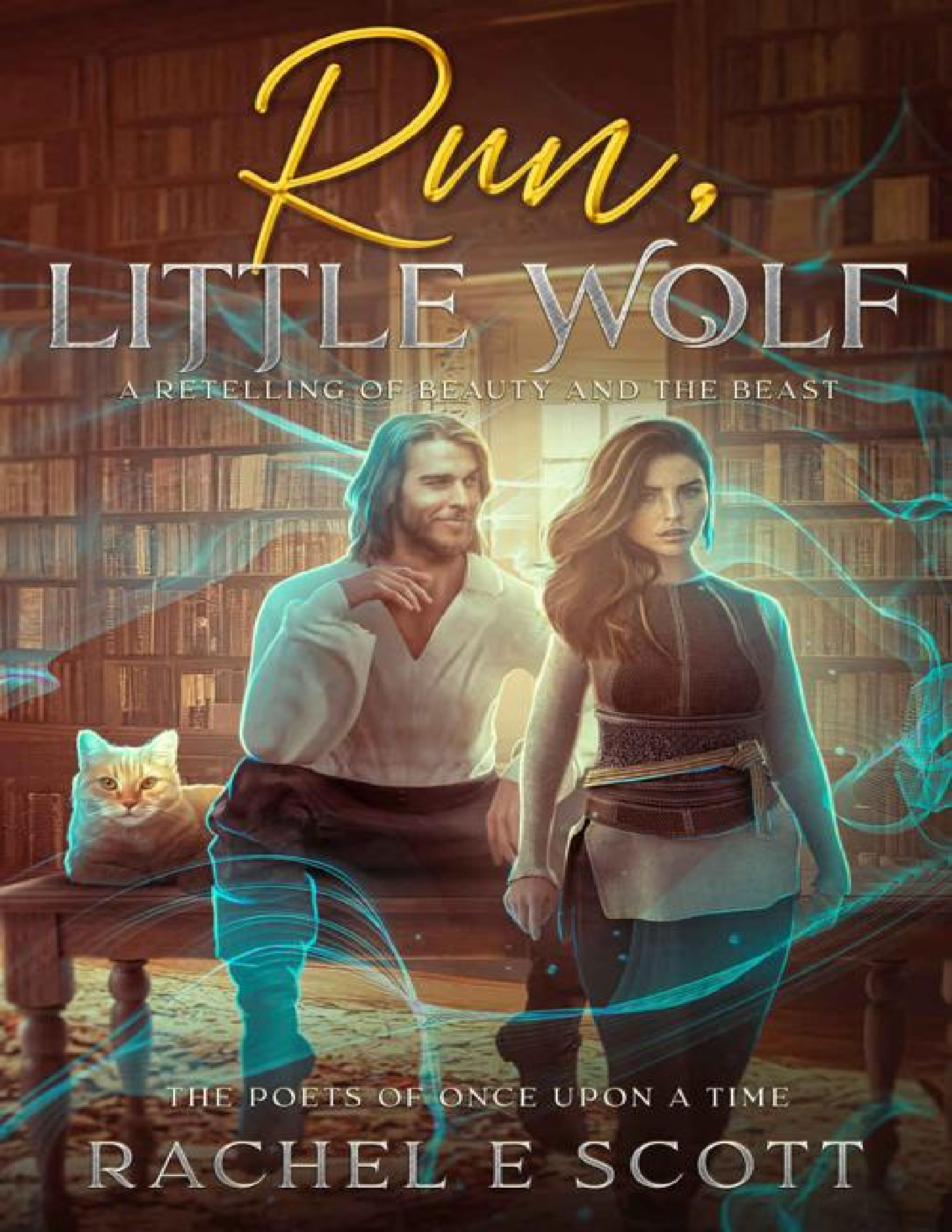
Run,
LITTLE WOLF
A RETELLING OF BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
THE POETS OF ONCE UPON A TIME
RACHEL E SCOTT

# Run, Little Wolf

A RETELLING OF BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

THE POETS OF ONCE UPON A TIME

RACHEL E SCOTT

*Run, Little Wolf*

Copyright © 2024 by Rachel E. Scott

All rights reserved.

This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Cover by Miblart.

For the Lost Girls, who share my love of Sawyer and his sassy one-liners. I wouldn't be here without you. You're my soul sisters and this one is for you.

TRISSOE
THE PORTS OF ONCE UPON A TIME
PHANTOS
SALVIN
SUMMER PALACE
ROBURRY
SUMMER PALACE
ANDONIA
MONTAIGN
DUNROW
REILAND
CARAKASS
CRENSHAW
SUMMER PALACE

# Also by Rachel E Scott

## Urban Fantasy

A Tale of Ribbons + Claws

*Stale-Mate*

*Bond-Mate*

*Check-Mate*

***

Plot Twist

*Bonding With the Bodyguard coming 2025*

***

Legends of Avalon

*Legends of Avalon: Merlin*

*Legends of Avalon: Arthur*

***

## Fairytale Retellings

The Poets of Once Upon a Time

*Run Little Wolf*

***

## Romantic Comedies

*The Grinch Next Door*

***

## Fantasy

Welcome to Autumnvale

*Book One Coming Autumn of 2024*

***

## For Writing Tools Such as The Writing Bible

*RachelEScott.com*

Do you like to listen to playlists while reading? I've got you covered. Here's my personal playlist for *Run, Little Wolf*. And if you pay special attention, the chapter subtitles *might* coincide with the songs… ;)

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2acdpQ3gkNXCqhciuKYNPa?si=b7a01538ce1e4996&pt=07f7ffe6c2a4b066831a9fa7607a5d67

# Content Warnings

All of my books are clean reads, including this one.

- In this book there are some references to heavier themes like past deaths, imprisonment and past abuse.
- The abuse is told in flashbacks and never with great detail, but please be aware that these characters carry heavy baggage.
- There is no sexual assault in this book, either mentioned in past tense or otherwise. The past abuse is mostly emotional with a few mentions of physical abuse. But again, none of this is done in detail and the overall theme of the book is hope, not darkness.
- There is no on page sex, no vulgar language (my books do sometimes use words like jackass, damn, or hell), and there is no explicit or gratuitous violence.

**Note:** This book is the first in a series of standalones and contains a tied-up story with a happy ending.

# If You Spot Any Errors…

As you're reading, you'll notice that some of the chapter titles have a capital letter in the wrong spot. This is intentional and a hint at the next book in *The Poets of Once Upon a Time*… ;) But if you find any other errors, please contact the author directly at https://rachelescott.com/925764824480, instead of contacting Amazon :)

# Contents

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Epilogue

Author's Note

# Prologue

## Abigail

"It's been four years Lyricist Abigail," Master Oberon sighs, both our gazes set on the manor up ahead. The sun has yet to rise, leaving its stone walls cast in shadows. From afar, it looks like an idyllic home for a princess.

But something tells me that the woman I'm looking for will be the furthest thing from royalty. Unremarkable in *his* eyes.

"Yes, I'm aware," I say dryly, watching the forest around us, certain I got the day and time correct. She should be here any moment now. "I was there, if you recall."

"Yes, and you cursed someone without consent from the Anthology," Master Oberon points out. "At the time, I let you go unscathed because I thought that maybe you were onto something. But this cannot go on." He sighs, rubbing his face in exasperation. "Lyricist Abigail, she hasn't shown up, it's time for you to undo the curse."

"Sh." I raise my hand to silence my superior's words, and he spears me with an indignant look, dark eyebrows raised. But I ignore him, unafraid.

Master Oberon is stern, but he lets me get away with too much. “Someone is coming.”

A moment later, a silhouette steps out from between the trees.

Moonlight and the eerie grayness of a coming dawn light the person enough for me to see that it’s a young woman with dirt on her cheeks and twigs stuck in her mane of dark hair. Her expression is heavy with caution as she makes her way through the forest with quick precision.

Master Oberon takes a step forward, watching the woman move unknowingly closer to us. There’s a sound further off and I see my cursed victim step into frame.

I watch with excitement as the two interact, unconcerned with their mutual animosity. *He always hates them.* But this girl is one of few who have openly hated him back. A grin spreads across my face when the woman runs through the manor gates a few moments later.

“Well, she’s here, isn’t she?” I smirk, finally feeling hopeful. “Still want me to undo the curse?”

Master Oberon shakes his head but says nothing, and we watch in silence, waiting for some kind of sign that things are going well. Somehow, I think it will be a while before we see one…

# Chapter 1

## Stella

### this ain't no place for no hero

**Five days earlier…**

*Please don't wake up, please don't wake up.* My fingers are steady as they hover above Jareth's jacket. I've done this often enough to know that shaky fingers will result in painful punishments. And therefore, they are not an option.

There's a muffled grunt behind me and my head whips around, my body freezing out of habit.

One of the guards turns over on his bedroll, mumbling in his sleep. I let out a silent breath of relief. Careful not to make a sound, I glance around at the group that surrounds the dying fire, checking to make sure that everyone is asleep.

The two men who were on night watch are still passed out against a tree. I smile. Earlier, when I pointed out that we were traveling in the wrong direction on the way here, they spit in my food. *But it didn't change the fact that I was right.* We lost a day's ride because we had to backtrack.

There are five other armed men fast asleep on their bedrolls, and though I have enough grievances against each of them to do more than steal from their captain, I let them be.

I've had vengeance before. It's what got me here. But freedom is what will get me out.

My eyes go back to Jareth, and I watch his face to ensure he's truly asleep. A part of me wants to hit him, to get retribution for the way he's treated me. I can still hear him whispering in my ear every time I went against his or the duke's orders, "This ain't no place for no hero, Stella. Be a good pet and behave."

If he were awake now, I know he would take the opportunity to have a reason to hit me. The duke never lets him be violent with me, but if Jareth hit me now, he could call me a thief and get away with it. *He deserves more than a black eye.*

But I don't give him one.

Instead, I reach under his pillow and slowly slide the object I'm looking for out from under him. A growl escapes him, and I pause, waiting for him to open his eyes.

But as the moments pass, he just smacks his lips and continues sleeping.

I don't take the time to celebrate my success, already on my feet, running through the camp. I'd like to take Jareth's horse with me—the poor beast deserves a better master—but he's too noticeable for me to make a clean getaway. So, I continue on foot, running as fast as my legs will carry me through the night.

I'm almost certain that no one in the camp will notice my absence until dawn, but it won't matter if I don't cover a lot of ground between now and

then. I know I want to go west, but I'm loath to admit that I'm not exactly sure where…

*Anywhere that will pay me for this.* I squeeze the golden quill between my fingers. I know by the heat that emanates from it that it's magic. Rare. Special. And worth a lot of money in the hands of the right buyer.

Enough for me to start over.

All I have to do is survive the forest and stay hidden from Jareth and his men. But even if they don't find me, the duke won't give up that easily…

# Chapter 2

## Stella

### a nighTmare dressed like a daydream

I welcome the cool early morning breeze against my skin. It's been a hot summer and I know that the day holds more heat than I'm eager to endure.

It's been six days of traveling through the forest on foot. I've nearly been caught three times and had to hide from Jareth for over an hour the last time. He and his men are persistent, but it's not because they miss me.

It's because they know the duke will punish them if I don't return.

But I've seen no sign of them in the last five hours, so I give myself a moment and close my eyes, tilting my head back

In my mind, I'm not on the run, dirty and hungry. I'm in a meadow beside a cottage covered in flowers. And inside is someone waiting for me. Someone who loves me.

It's the last time I remember being happy, and I hold onto it like air. I can survive weeks without a breath of it, conditioned to live with only memories of such feelings. But every now and again, I need a gulp.

I hike my bag higher on my shoulder, checking the knife at my hip, the quill stuffed safely in my boot. I have to be near a village by now, but I can't risk going into town. It would be too easy for Jareth to find me in a crowd of people he could question. Thankfully, my servitude to the duke requires stealth and anonymity. So I can safely rule out any wanted posters with my face on them.

But I know the guard captain is still back there on my tail. *I need to keep moving.*

*Crack.* I spin around, squinting at the trees. It's early, too early even for the sun to begin rising yet. The world is dim and grey around me, but I spot a shadow moving in the forest. When it comes closer, I realize that it's a man.

A thick head of light brown hair falls past his chin, tousled back from his face in smooth layers. My fingers itch to touch it and see if it's as soft as it looks. But I know I'd be safer petting a bear.

Men like this are dangerous. *A nightmare dressed like a daydream.*

He's handsome, with dimples and green eyes, a strong nose and jaw, the latter of which is covered in stubble. But there's a look in his eye, like I'm a nuisance for existing. His arrogance is palpable, and I want to smack him.

Instead, I run.

The trees speed by as I give my legs everything I've got. I haven't slept more than eight hours in the last week, but I've lived on adrenaline before. My body knows the drill.

We're tired. We're hungry. We're scared. But we can sleep when we've survived.

“I wouldn’t go that way if I were you,” the man shouts behind me. I curse him for being so loud. I haven’t seen Jareth or his men in two days, but if they’re close, they’ll certainly hear us.

The man’s heavy footfalls thunder behind me, though if he’s hoping to stop me, he’s not going nearly fast enough.

“You’re going to get trapped!” he yells, but I ignore him, swerving when I see a stone building through the trees to my left. As the trees thin, I see that it’s a large manor with arched windows and a pair of turrets, and there’s a gate set into a ten-foot wall.

It’s open.

It occurs to me as I run for the open gate that I may be running right into this man’s home. But I set the worry aside as soon as it enters my mind.

I’ve gotten out of worse places. All I need is time to get away, and once I’m in, I can hide until the right moment to escape.

The man is still shouting at me as I reach the gate, and it takes all my strength to shut it behind me. The metal bars have just latched when he runs up, grabbing them between his fists. I expect him to try and yank them open or pull out a key to unlock them.

But instead, he sighs, loud and heavy, setting his forehead against the bars. “You’re an idiot,” he says defeatedly.

“Says the man who’s locked out,” I retort, backing up along the wide pebbled path.

“Says the woman who’s locked *in*.”

“Temporarily.”

He laughs bitterly and lets go of the bars, taking a step back. “Go ahead then, try to run. I’d love to see how far you get.”

His words aren’t encouraging, but I pay them little heed, already running the other way. I sprint over the lawn to a line of trees and shrubs, ducking behind them to get out of sight from anyone inside the manor. Once I’m hidden in the shadows, I turn back, but I don’t see the man.

I consider the idea that perhaps he’s circling the property to enter at another gate, or waiting outside so he can catch me when I escape.

But something tells me that this man wouldn’t go through so much trouble just to catch me. So, I slip further into the trees and search the stone wall for an exit, hoping that the man’s doubts about me finding one are wrong…

# Chapter 3

## Alistair

### i do it alL the time

I growl as I enter the library, barefoot. I left my dirty boots in the foyer for the maids to take care of. I know Mildred will give me an earful for it later, but I don't care. I feel a headache coming on and I think I know where it's coming from.

*I just got rid of the last girl two days ago.*

"Can't a man have some blasted peace?" I snarl, slamming my palm on the table, rattling a stack of books. Narcissus, my cat, lifts his orange head from where he was sleeping on top of my notes and hisses at me.

He has a plush bed by the fireplace, and I've tried to convince him to sleep on my own bed many times, but he prefers to snooze in places where he can damage my things.

"Brat," I say to him. He simply meows and lays his head back down, crumpling a page of notes beneath him.

This room is dimmer than others in the manor, every tall window cloaked in drapes, leaving the space to be lit by sconces on the walls. Bookshelves line the room and more stand free, creating rows and rows of

books on a multitude of subjects. History, geography, poetry, fiction, I have it all.

There are two sofas and a few armchairs in front of the fireplace, and despite being filled to the brim with books, the room has always felt somewhat unwelcoming to me. Perhaps it's because I've been seeking its help for four years and come up empty.

My hands tangle in my shaggy hair, locking onto the smooth strands as I fume over my new houseguest. The longest I've gone without one of these unwanted females demanding my attention has been two weeks. *Two weeks* in the last four years without some miserable girl simpering around my home, moony eyed or half crazed.

Sometimes both.

Four years ago, I would have welcomed the attention. Even from women as unfortunate looking as the ones haunting my halls. But after four years, my nerves are too raw, too overstimulated to be bothered with niceties for people who can offer me nothing but annoyance or danger.

In the beginning of my purgatory, I thought the loneliness would cause me to entertain a flirtation with anything in a dress, regardless of their usefulness. But with every day that passes between these dark stone walls, my desperation turns itself away from pleasure and toward revenge.

"What are you stomping around the manor for?" Mildred demands. I turn to see her enter my domain.

Her blonde hair is speckled with grey and pulled back into its customary bun. An apron is tied around her waist and her expression is stern, her kind face lined with age.

"There's a new one," I snap, my eyes wide with frustration. I know I look like I've gone mad, but that's because I have. *It's all these women!* "I

won’t do it again, Milly. Not so soon. I can barely stomach it when I’ve got time between them.”

“Calm down. Where is the poor thing?”

I scowl at her. Why she insists on acting like these women—not me—are the victims, I’ll never understand. Yet time after time, she dotes on them and tries to push us together. *As if my happiness could be satiated by the waif I saw in the woods this morning.* The only thing that will bring me contentment is making my neglectful brother suffer for leaving me here to rot. *Not a half-mad runaway.*

“Outside hiding in the bushes like a rabbit,” I reply, rolling my eyes. “If we’re lucky, she’s ill and will be dead by tomorrow.”

“She’s what?”

Mildred bustles off to the only window that isn’t covered in drapes, peeking out into the morning sunlight. The window faces the east side of the property where there’s a small lake and a grove of dogwood trees that are in full bloom. A ten-foot wall lines the entire estate, and even if the woman manages to get over the wall, the curse won’t let her out.

I would know. I’ve tried to force more than one young woman from my property.

After the woman ran from me this morning, I spent a quarter of an hour walking around the forest, making sure she left no trail that could lead someone to the manor.

I’ve had enough fathers and brothers come demanding their daughters and sisters to last me a lifetime. Granted, they always forget about me and the manor once they leave, but the last thing I want to deal with is more people.

They're always more irritating than they are entertaining. *And after four years, my good humor is dead anyway.*

“She doesn’t look like the usual ones,” Mildred hums to herself. I don’t like the thoughtful look on her face. It’s full of scheming. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen one so determined to get away…Maybe this one will be different.”

“No.”

Milly turns to me. “I’m sorry?”

“Whatever you’re thinking, the answer is no.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I wasn’t going to ask you a question.”

“Don’t play with me Milly,” I say to her, slumping down into my usual chair at the table as I point a finger her way. “I want her out of here. This one doesn’t seem like she’s playing with a full set and I’m too pretty to die young when she stabs me in my sleep. We’ve already been down that road before.”

Mildred goes serious at the mention of Leeta. She shakes her head disapprovingly, crossing her arms. “That was one time three years ago. And you use it as an excuse not to give any of these girls a chance. But if you would stop being so ridiculous and give the girls the benefit of the doubt, you might find that you can actually be happy for once.”

“You know when I’ll be happy, Milly? When my brother is suffering, freedom is mine, and I never have to endure the company of a parade of ugly party crashers ever again.”

“Alistair Godfrey!” Mildred gasps, her pale face going red. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

I smirk dispassionately. “And you ought to realize how lucky you are that I love you. No one else would get away with such talk.”

Her face hardens as she puts her fists on her hips. “No, *you* ought to realize how lucky *you* are that you love me. If you didn’t, I wouldn’t put up with you.”

I don’t argue with her. She’s right. Few people get the treatment from me that Mildred does. Though I’m positive that *she* would love *me* even if I were cruel. She’s too compassionate to help it.

“Fine. Will you *please* deal with her and keep her out of my way?” I ask with a sarcastic smile.

“The most I can do is give her a room.”

“Ugh, just make sure it’s in the west wing and keep her out of my sight during the day. You set the last one up down the hall from me and I found our houseguest half-dressed in my chambers on three occasions.”

Mildred says nothing, shaking her head as she walks away, but I know she’ll take care of the matter. She’s done it many times before.

My eyes drift to the pages and pages of notes scattered across the table. Four years of research. Four years of plotting and planning, refusing to die stored away like an unused coat left to the moths, and I have so little to show for it. *But I’ll rise up again. I do it all the time.* A lifetime of being oppressed by my brother has given me that much.

I glance at the gilded mirror set against the wall beside the fireplace. The scene through the unblocked window reflects on the glass and I watch as the young woman weaves through the bushes, her dark hair a mess and dirt on her cheeks.

But there’s something about her face that I recognize. A hard, unyielding look that I’ve seen many times on my own features. Whoever this woman is, she may be unattractive, but she knows what it is to never give up.

*Probably the only thing we have in common.*

# Chapter 4

## Stella

### a bird locked up in a Cage

I've been around the entire estate four times and made a dozen unsuccessful attempts to climb the stone fence by the time the sun starts to set.

I'm not positive where I am without a map, but I'm sure I've never heard of any nobility living in this area. But whoever owns this place is clearly rich and powerful enough to require a giant fence to protect it.

No one has come out to search for me since I arrived, but that doesn't give me any comfort. Whoever lives here is unlikely to let an interloper go freely wandering about their property. And the man from before was right.

I am locked in.

I've tried the gate twice, but it won't budge. Even the hair pin I keep in the bun that holds back half of my brown, chest length hair was useless, which rankled me because I consider myself a fairly accomplished lockpick.

There aren't any other gates or doors on the property and as darkness begins to descend, I'm feeling desperate. My only source of comfort is the

knowledge that if I can't get out, Jareth can't get in.

Tapping my leg where the quill is hidden in my boot, I glare at the stone wall. It's too tall for me to climb—I've fallen four times trying. But an oak tree grows close by, a lone branch hanging out over the wall…

*I have exactly one chance at freedom, and I'm not going to let a fence stand in my way.*

My bag strapped to my shoulders, I hike myself up the tree, my rough hands gripping the bark with the help of the battle-worn callouses on my fingers. A few birds chirp as I invade their home, taking to the dimming sky above.

"Believe me, I want to be here about as much as you want me here," I mumble.

Once I'm on the overhanging branch, I have to squeeze it between my thighs to keep myself from slipping off as I wiggle toward the fence. Freedom looms on the horizon, the forest and far off farmland spread out in the distance.

*Just a little farther.* I push myself along the branch, grinning when I reach the wall. Careful and slow, I slip down onto the stone, sitting on the ledge. But when I try to swing myself over, my legs freeze like they're blocked by an invisible force.

Confused, I try again. But something stops me, like I've hit an invisible wall. I squint but see no obstacle, yet when I press my hands forward, they stop as though they've met glass.

"What the—"

"You won't be able to get out that way."

Alarmed, I turn and see a middle-aged woman walking quickly through the grass, a friendly look on her face. Her blonde hair is mostly grey,

pulled up into a loose bun, lacking the severity I often see from the maids at the duke's castle.

"Why not?" I ask warily. The woman looks kind. Doesn't mean she is.

"It won't let you."

"It?" I ask incredulously. "What does that mean—"

But something pulls me forward, cutting me off and nearly sending me careening to the ground. I grasp hold of the branch above to keep myself steady, but then I feel it again. A tug in my chest that urges me forward like I've been attached to a marionette string.

"This is why I came out," the woman says worriedly, lifting her hands as though she could actually catch me if I were to fall. "I was afraid it would happen when you were unaware and send you to your death."

Unable to fight off the pull, I climb down the tree, stumbling as the invisible string jerks me along the way. "What is 'it'?" I demand when my feet hit the ground. The tug continues, pulling me toward the manor, and I have no choice but to be dragged forward.

"It's the curse," the woman says, following beside me. "I'll explain it all later, but right now you have to go to dinner with the master."

"Excuse me?" I squeak, sitting on the ground to try and slow the pull that's straining against my chest. It does nothing against the invisible string, simply dragging me along the grass on my backside.

I try to stop myself, snatching clumps of grass and dirt, but it's not enough and I stand before the magic can scrape my body against the stone stairs. I stumble up the steps to the open front doors and trip inside, not moving fast enough to keep up with the pull.

"Just go in, sit down and eat," the woman encourages, following me through the foyer and down a hall to another set of double doors. "He'll

likely ignore you altogether, and then afterward I can explain things. But for now, you have to go inside. The curse requires that you dine together."

"Who is he? And what curse?" I beg, panicked.

"It will be over before you know it." Then she pats my hand affectionately, gives me a kind smile, and disappears back down the hall.

I try to follow after her, but I can't move except closer to the doors. My body pulsing with fury, I glare at the looming doors, but the invisible string tethered to my chest yanks hard and I trip forward, shoving them open.

Inside is a dining room. A ridiculously long table sits in the center, adorned with gold candlesticks, shining silverware, and a table runner embroidered with gold and green. The room is opulent, scrollwork accents the curtained windows, and the mantle around the large fireplace is carved with roses and bears.

And sitting at the head of the long table is the man from the gate.

His hair is combed now, laying in perfect fluttering layers of silky light brown around his face. His strong jaw clenches as he watches me enter and I wonder if he's capable of a real smile.

"You're late," is all he has to say, his tone lazy and disinterested.

I say nothing, staring at him where he sits at the other end of the long table.

"Stand if you want, but you can't leave until the curse deems that we've spent enough time in each other's unfortunate presence." He lifts an unamused brow, raising his water glass.

Frustration begins to override my desire to run and I sit on the plush chair, reclining back on the velvet like I have nowhere better to be, my bag nestled at my feet. The man across from me gives me a once over.

The scrunch of his nose tells me he finds me lacking.

For some reason, this angers me more than being held captive. Being treated like a caged bird, I'm used to, but being looked at like a moldy steak is new. And undeserved.

I have little use for my own beauty in my circumstances, but I know it exists. I feel it every time one of the guards at the castle stares a little too long regardless of my station. Every time a child smiles eagerly at me, innocently believing that someone who looks nice must be nice. Green eyes and freckles combined with dark hair that curls and waves to my chest is an appealing combination to most people.

Obviously, the man across from me disagrees.

"Your room is on the opposite side of the manor from mine," he drawls, that disdainful look on his face. "That's on purpose. Your stay here is not of my doing nor is it my wish. So, while you're here, stay on your side of the manor and out of my way. We will eat evening meals together, but otherwise I expect to forget that you exist."

"Ah, so you're one of those men," I say despite the warning bells in my head signaling me to keep my mouth shut. I never listen to them. "The ones who think their every expectation should be met without argument."

"In my home, yes," he sasses, a smirk deepening the dimple in his left cheek. "Will that be a problem?"

I shrug and smile, innocently batting my eyes. "Not for me. For you, probably."

His eyes narrow as he studies me, and I get the feeling that I've amused him. But just as the thought enters my mind, he looks down at a book beside his plate.

"We'll see," he mumbles.

My smile widens and I eat my food with vigor. He thinks I'm a bird locked up in a cage. Useless and annoying.

He's forgetting that birds have talons.

***

The man abruptly leaves the room after about half an hour, his food gone and a book under his arm. He's dressed simply for someone so self-important, but I suspect it's because he doesn't have the patience to dress in something less comfortable. Patience, humility, grit—he has none of it.

*He's a pampered princess who has a penchant for breaking his toys.* He shouldn't be too difficult to deal with. It's this supposed curse that will be my real problem.

Once the man is gone, the woman from earlier steps into the room, looking sheepish.

"I apologize for whatever he said to you," she says, offering me an apologetic smile. "I'm Mildred, the housekeeper. But most everyone calls me Milly."

I stand, debating whether or not to give her my real name. Jareth may come looking for me eventually, but I doubt he'll be willing to reveal my name to anyone. Plus, it would be nice to not have to lie for once.

"Stella," I say, shaking her hand and sliding my bag back over my shoulders. "And I appreciate the apology, he needed it."

Milly sighs, shaking her head. "Alistair can be…a challenge. Sometimes I don't know what to do with him."

"I can think of a few things."

Milly laughs, smiling thoughtfully at me. "I like you. You'll survive well against him." When my expression drops, she rushes to reassure me. "Oh,

he won’t hurt you, that’s not what I meant. He can just be very stubborn sometimes—and rude. But I don’t think you’ll be intimidated by him, which is good because it means that he won’t be able to push you around while you’re here.”

“And just how long will I be here? You mentioned a curse.”

The housekeeper deflates, motioning for me to follow as she heads out into the hall. “The master—Alistair—is cursed. It’s a long story, and unfortunately, we’re woefully uneducated on the matter. I’ll answer any questions you have about it, but not until tomorrow when you’ve had the chance to sleep. You look like you’re in need of it.” I blush, embarrassed that their first impression of me is after I've been sleeping in a forest for over a week.

“But for now,” Mildred continues, leading us past stone halls lit by sconces, almost every window cloaked in drapes, “I’ll just say that neither you nor the master can leave the manor.”

“But I saw him in the forest,” I argue, following her around a corner.

“He can leave the grounds temporarily,” she replies evasively. “But you cannot. While I don’t think we’ve ever had a woman here as determined as you, even you won’t be able to find a way off the property during your stay. And every evening at sundown, you and the master will both be pulled back to the dining room. So, leaving would be a moot point anyway.”

“Other women have been stuck here too?”

“Yes, many. But they all leave perfectly safe.” She blinks, seemingly bothered by her own words.

“How did they leave?”

Mildred pauses outside a closed door. “They could leave after three months. The same will be true for you.”

“*Three months?*” I demand, all my dreams of freedom fluttering away. “I can’t stay here for three months.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. You can’t leave until then. We can post mail for you if you require it, and you’re welcome to explore the manor as much as you please. But until the three months are up, you’re stuck.”

She unlocks the door and disappears inside, and I hesitate a moment before going in after her. The room is just as beautiful as the rest of the manor, gilded in gold and lined with stone. A fire is already burning in the fireplace, and a painting of a landscape hangs above it. There’s a plush green bed with a matching silk canopy. And in front of the fire is a sofa and a set of chairs.

The room is beautiful but far too extravagant. Hands as bloody as mine shouldn’t touch a place like this. I feel guilty just standing here.

“The bath is hot, there are soaps on the table, and a clean set of pajamas on the bed,” Mildred says, pointing to a tub that sits beneath a window, moonlight streaming down into the second story room. “I didn’t think you would want assistance.”

“I don’t, thank you,” I say sincerely, thankful that I don’t have to fight her on the matter.

“Well, just ring the bell if you need anything,” she nods to a rope by the door. “Otherwise, breakfast is usually at ten. I can have it brought to you __”

“I’ll find the kitchen.” I mean the words to be polite, but they sound like a rejection.

I cringe, but Mildred doesn’t seem offended by it. She simply smiles and wishes me a goodnight before leaving the room.

The moment she’s gone, I feel the weight of the morning settling on my shoulders. It feels longer than six days since I ran from Jareth. But I’d be naïve to pretend that time has stopped, that they won’t come for me.

And if Mildred is right, they’ll have three months to find me.

But I decide that it’s a problem for tomorrow and stare longingly at the bed. It’s been years since I’ve slept in a bed that didn’t feel tainted by the man who owned it or the money that paid for it. I may be a captive here, held by a supposed curse, but for the first time since I was a child, I don’t feel like a prisoner.

So just for tonight, I put the scented oils in my bath and snuggle in the soft pajamas, letting myself pretend that I belong to no one but myself.

# Chapter 5

## Stella

### free of woMen with madness

Sun breaks through my windows like an uninvited guest, and it takes me a moment to remember where I am.

But then it all comes back to me. Everything.

Moments flash like lightning: my mother planting new flowers in the garden, Paul bemoaning my uselessness, the duke saying ‘that’s my Little Wolf’ when I successfully completed a mission, my father carrying me on his shoulders in the spring sun. Years’ worth of good and bad experiences are both a lovely and rude awakening to a beautiful day. Some of them I try to hold onto, and others I bury as I reacclimate to my surroundings.

And then I recall meeting the master of the manor yesterday. *Alistair.* A flashy name for a flashy man. I don’t want to buy Mildred’s explanation of a curse that will force me to remain in Alistair's company. But the invisible string that dragged me to dinner and the magical wall that prevented me from jumping the fence prove that she’s right.

Whether I like it or not, Alistair and I are stuck together. *For now.* No curse is going to stop me from getting my freedom.

Resigned to my predicament for the moment, I get up, dressing in my own clothes, which are waiting for me on the foot of the bed, cleaned and pressed. Looking in the mirror, I'm surprised how much better I look after a bath. There's no dirt on my high cheekbones and sloped nose, and no twigs in my hair. Since I'm rarely this spotless, I choose to leave my hair down.

My knives are securely hidden in my clothes as I leave the room behind. I don't think anyone here is out to kill me, but one can never be too sure.

The halls are nearly as quiet now as they were yesterday. I know there are more staff here than Milly based on the amount of food that was prepared last night, but I see none of them on my walk. And since I'm fairly certain the manor doesn't get many visitors other than the women Mildred mentioned, I won't be able to blend in like I normally do.

It doesn't take long to find the kitchen—the noise is like a beacon. I peek around the corner and find the place bustling.

A cook stands at the stove beneath a wide window, young men are doing dishes at the sink and maids are cleaning the long wooden table that sits in front of a fireplace on my right. *I must have slept longer than I thought if they're already done eating.*

A particularly young maid turns and catches me watching, a smile spreading on her cherubic face. "Good morning!"

The group turns toward me at her loud greeting, and I smile awkwardly at their attention, stepping inside. "Good morning," I say hesitantly, quietly assessing the bunch.

There are about ten people in the room. The cook is a bald, middle-aged man, and a young girl with too many similarities not to be his daughter stands beside him. There are three young maids watching me with

silverware in their hands, frozen in the task of clearing the table. Two young boys with dirty dishes clasped between their fingers stare, half wet with dishwater. And two middle aged women are standing with Mildred, their attention pinned to me.

“Stella,” Mildred greets me, the smile on her face just as genuine as the one from last night. “I’m glad to see you. Did you sleep well?”

“Surprisingly,” I admit, moving further into the room, feeling suddenly self-conscious. My long-sleeved grey shirt beneath a belted bodice is worn and faded, my breeches and tall boots equally beaten down. Normally, I dress for the mission. Sometimes that means dressing down in dirty clothes, and occasionally it means dressing up in nice dresses.

If I’d known what I would be facing on this excursion, I probably would have gone with something that makes me look less like a thief and more like a lady. But I make do with what I have.

“Everyone, this is Stella,” Mildred announces, motioning a maid to grab the plates of food from the counter. “Stella, this is the staff. I don’t expect you to remember their names, but we have Carson and David.” The two dishwashing boys. “Becca, Christine, and Maddy.” The three young maids who cleared the table. The youngest of them, Maddy, who can’t be more than fifteen, is already serving me a plate of eggs, toast, ham and rolls. “Brutus and Kaitlyn,” Milly continues, pointing to the cook and his daughter, who smile at me. “And Tilda, Denise and Franchesca.” The older maids who were speaking to Milly when I walked in.

I nod to all of them, repeating their names three times in my mind as I stare at their faces, cataloguing their most notable qualities. Like the bright red of Franchesca’s short hair, Carson’s buck teeth and Becca’s freckles.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I smile, digging into the generous breakfast. I don’t even consider whether or not the food is safe to eat. I’m starving and if they planned to kill me, they wouldn't need to resort to poison.

“How are you finding things?” Mildred asks kindly, leaning against the counter.

I swallow a bite of ham. “Fine. I haven’t taken the chance to explore much yet. I wanted to come and ask a few things first.”

“Ask away,” Mildred says, waving a hand. “We’ll do our best to give you the answers.”

No one flinches at her offer of honesty, all of them watching me with unmasked curiosity. I can’t blame them for it, I’m a stranger in their home. But it does make me wonder how many women they’ve had this same conversation with before…

“How many women have been trapped here?” I ask, watching their faces for signs of discomfort. If I can find something they don’t want me to ask, then I’ll know what to look for when I go snooping.

“Eleven,” Mildred replies without issue.

“Who cast the curse?”

Mildred sighs, but I suspect that she’s more disappointed in her information than my question. “We don’t know. It was obviously a Poet, but Alistair was alone when it happened and though I saw the woman, I’d never seen her before and don’t know her name.”

I nod, mulling over her answer. Poets are the only people with magic on the continent, though they’re mostly extinct now. They founded the six countries that make up Trissoe, but two hundred years ago, they disappeared. Since then, humans have taken over the five thrones and

magic has become scarce. Our only real source of it is the artifacts the Poets left behind.

There are rumored to be a few Poets still alive here and there, but they're rare and hard to find. If one cursed Alistair, they must have had good reason to do magic out in the open like that. *I wonder what he did to deserve it.* Something tells me Milly won't be explaining that part.

"What are the restrictions of the curse?" I ask, opting not to ask about Alistair and risk offending my only allies.

"Well, I already explained that you cannot leave the grounds," Milly replies, everyone else getting comfortable, leaning against counters and chairs as they listen to my interrogation. "The master cannot go far from the grounds and we, like you, cannot leave at all. You and the master must be in the dining room at sunset every night. Thankfully, your end of the curse only lasts for three months, while the master's is permanent so long as the curse continues. You may have also noticed that he does not find you attractive."

I recoil, slightly offended that she feels the need to point out Alistair's rude attitude toward my beauty—or lack thereof in his opinion.

"It's the curse," David, the young dishwasher says, shrugging his small shoulders. He can't be more than twelve. "He thinks all women are ugly, even if they're as pretty as you."

He blushes immediately, ducking his head, and I turn to Mildred, confused.

"Part of the curse causes him to see all women as unattractive, no matter how beautiful they truly are," she says. "His reactions to you are not a reflection of your appearance, but rather what he *thinks* your appearance is."

“Hm…” I hum, my mouth full of bread. If what they say is true, then it’s not Alistair’s fault that he thinks I’m ugly. It is, however, his fault that he chooses to comment on it out loud. And though I have no interest in helping the man, I am interested in getting myself and the staff free of his curse.

“How does the curse break?” I ask, and everyone immediately slumps, disheartened.

“We don’t know,” Francesca sighs, a basket of fabric hanging from her arm and a frown on her pretty face. “No one does.”

“None of you?” I say, looking at all of them. They each shake their head.

“As I said, Alistair was alone when he was cursed,” Milly shrugs hopelessly. “He was in too much pain to hear her words and I did not arrive until the deed was done. And since we don’t know the name of the Poet, we cannot ask her either.”

I nod thoughtfully, unsure what to make of this new information. I can’t find a single flaw in their story, but that doesn’t comfort me. Because that still leaves an unsolvable curse and a rude housemate for me to deal with.

My mind drifts to Alistair, who looked at me and was left wanting. There is a cavalier air to him, something selfish in his eyes. All he seems to care about is being free of women with madness or a lack of beauty. But I have to acknowledge that so far, he lacks the outright cruelty of the duke.

But what kind of man is sentenced to prison in a manor in the middle of nowhere, with a string of female prisoners and an inability to be attracted to any of them?

I shake my head. *I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.*

# Chapter 6

## Alistair

### no body, no Crime

The library is colder today. I don't like it.

I flip somewhat mindlessly through the pages of the book in my hands. I've read them all at this point, but I'm convinced that a second or third time through will reveal something I haven't seen before. Some of the pages are folded to mark certain ideas, but none of them mean anything to me right now.

Because *she's* distracting me.

My eyes drift to the mirror against the wall where the yard below is reflected through the window. Part of me is tempted to see how close I can get to the window without feeling the consequences so I can see her more clearly.

And that alone concerns me.

I don't risk things. Not for some random girl who's found her way onto my property, disrupting my rare bit of peace and quiet. But I find myself curious as I stand and move closer to the glass, watching the woman furiously stomping across the grounds.

The woman—I almost never take the time to know their names—is talking to herself in the sunlight, bunching her dark hair in her hands. I've seen her try to escape by climbing the fence, picking the gate lock—she even attempted to force the front gates open earlier with a large branch.

It was my entertainment while I ate my breakfast in the dining room.

I'll admit that this woman is interesting, but I stand beside the concerns I shared with Mildred. This one is volatile. If provoked, she might actually try to knife me at dinner next time. And while I don't want her here, I don't want a repeat of Leeta either.

My body goes tight, resisting thoughts of Leeta's stay at the manor. I could have one hundred women come through this place and not remember a single one, but I'll never forget Leeta. Even if I wish I could.

A smile finds its way onto my face as the woman outside walks to the small lake, throwing rock after rock into the shores. Ripples stutter across the water and she finally plops down on the grass, falling back to stare up at the sky.

I briefly wonder what she's thinking, and am surprised that it's my mother's voice I imagine hearing. *Must be the fire.* They both have plenty of it.

But that realization only causes my mind to worry, wondering where my mother is and if she's okay. Then my feelings turn to shame.

Because I'm positive that she would be disappointed in me if she could see me now.

She used to say I had an unlimited amount of untapped potential for greatness. *But she also said that no one gains weight from eating sweets.* How much could her words be worth, really? But deep down I know they mean everything. So many of them are still ringing in my ears…

**Five years ago…**

*“Tell me he didn’t do it,” Mother says to me the moment she walks into my room. She’s usually so unflappable, but Orrin has been scaring her lately. Why, I couldn’t say. He seems the same as always to me.*

*“What who did?” I answer distractedly, holding up two shirts as I stare in the mirror, trying to decide which Carissa will like best. She seems to smile more when I wear blue, but other women frequently compliment me when I wear red. I shrug and toss the red aside. “For the dowry,” I mumble.*

*“You don’t know?” I turn at the horror in Mother’s voice. She can be a worrier at times, but never scared.*

*When I look at her now though, I don’t see the formidable woman who handled two teenage boys without a hitch, or the woman who has the court eating out of the palm of her hand. No, this woman looks like a ghost, and it makes my skin chill.*

*“Tell me,” I say, giving her my full attention.*

*Her eyes water and I fight against the instinct to cringe. Mother never cries. “It’s Orrin. He wanted to punish one of the guards for abandoning his post, so he set the man’s house on fire. Alistair…” she clasps my arm, “A child was found in the ashes. Please, I need you to tell me that Orrin didn’t know the child was inside. It’s bad enough that my son would burn a house down as retribution, but to kill a child…I can’t…”*

*I toss the blue shirt aside, folding my mother in a tight hug. She sobs against my shoulder as my mind spins.*

*Orrin has been aggressive since we were young. More competitive, more intense. In the past few years, he’s done things my mother will never find*

*out about because I'm afraid it would shatter her. But to kill an innocent child on purpose?*

*I wish I could tell her it wasn't true. No body, no crime. But if I know Orrin, it might be…*

*"Let me talk to him," I say, rubbing her shoulders as her crying calms. "I'll get to the bottom of it, okay? But I don't want you to worry."*

*She looks up at me, unconvinced. "I don't want you to provoke him, Alistair," she warns, her blue eyes commanding. She's a beautiful woman, not even forty yet, her light brown hair still full of color in its braided updo. I hate to see someone so young and bright filled with so much anxiety. I vow to ease as much of it as possible.*

*"I won't. Now why don't you go have some lunch and I'll see what I can find out."*

*She agrees and the moment she's gone, I seek out my brother. It's something I've made a point* not *to do, especially since he took over Father's role…*

*I find my brother in his office, looking over a map with greedy eyes. He looks so much like Father with his dark hair and angular features that I have a hard time looking at him. But his eyes he got from Mother. If only he got her passionate sense of righteousness or Father's patience.* If he had, we wouldn't be in this mess.

*"Brother," I greet, stopping a few strides away from his desk. It's not that I think my brother would harm me, but if for some reason he saw me as an obstacle…he might.*

*"Alistair," Orrin smiles, "To what do I owe this rare pleasure?"*

*"I've heard a rumor that I wanted to verify."*

*“Is it about that maid? Because she died of natural causes,” he snaps, palm hitting the desk.*

*I try not to recoil at his admission of being blamed for an innocent’s death. My brother is cruel and selfish, but his cruelty has always been contained to those who get in his way. How could a maid, or a simple guard be an obstacle to him?*

*“No, it’s about the fire,” I hedge, buttoning the sleeve of my shirt and feigning self-centered indifference. It’s not difficult. I slip into the mindset on a daily basis in order to survive the dark, evil environment my brother has turned our home into.*

*But while Orrin is a terrible leader and an unkind man, I do not have the means to fight him. Nor would I. I don’t want his position or responsibility. I would only drop them both, letting them shatter.*

*Orrin narrows his eyes at me. “Mother put you up to this, didn’t she? She’s been getting nosier lately. She doesn’t approve of my methods.” He paces at his desk, and I berate myself for not thinking to bring a weapon. “She’s becoming a problem, and I don’t have time for problems.”*

*“Don’t worry about Mother,” I interrupt with a lazy smile. “I’ll keep her distracted.”*

*“You would be willing to do that?” Orrin asks, stopping to study me.*

*I shrug and roll my eyes. “I may not be good for much as far as you’re concerned, but I can handle Mother.”*

*He seems to mull it over, his features hard. But as I stare him down, I notice that the expression doesn’t quite match the detached look in his eyes. “Good,” he nods. “Keep her busy and away from my business. I don’t want her to become an obstacle.”*

*I agree and leave the room as quickly as possible without arousing suspicion. But once I'm free of Orrin's office, I all but run back to my mother.* I need to get her out of this place and away from Orrin. *She's too curious for her own good and Orrin will not tolerate it much longer.*

*I may not have any interest in taking down my brother, but my mother is all I have. I will not lose her to him.*

And I didn't. Orrin may be single-handedly ruining everything my father built, but he can't ruin my mother if he can't find her. And as I watch my unfortunate looking new housemate, I think I'm glad that Orrin hasn't found her either. Fire like that would be squashed beneath him, and I rather enjoy watching hers dance unpredictably.

# Chapter 7

## Stella

### it feEls so good

It's official, the grounds of the manor are unescapable.

Mildred and the rest of the staff have already warned me of this, but I had to try. Unfortunately, my many attempts to get over the fence or through the front gate were completely useless and mostly just made me angry.

And after four silent dinners with his majesty, I'm seriously considering knocking Alistair unconscious just to see if it temporarily confuses the curse and lets me escape.

I've been at the manor for four days, and he hasn't said one word to me since the first night. Apparently, I'm not attractive enough to speak to. This I can safely assume after the number of times he's cringed at the sight of me. I wish I could say that the feeling is mutual, but we both know that he's beautiful. *Not that I'll ever tell.*

"So, is this how the next three months are going to go?" I ask, liberally slathering butter onto a piece of bread. The one thing I can't complain

about since coming here is the food. Or the linens. I would go to battle and die a hero's death for my bed.

Alistair smirks but doesn't speak and I hate the game I know he's playing. He has a book open in front of him, tipped back against an empty glass, feigning deafness. But he loves to see me squirm, wants to hear me beg for his attention.

I'm a mouse and he's the cat.

"Fine. I'll talk for the both of us then," I say, careful not to let my annoyance show, instead humming as I eat a bite of steak. If Alistair knows that he's annoyed me, he'll feel he's won. And I will not lose to him. "I've temporarily given up my attempts to escape the grounds. Clearly everything I've been told about the curse is true. So instead, I'm going to start scouring the manor to see what I can find out about you and this curse."

I watch him to see if any part of my words strikes a chord of discomfort, but he doesn't so much as flinch.

"Keep your snooping away from my room and the library," is his only response.

"I'm curious, do I appear as some kind of horrifying banshee to you?"

"What?" he glances at me, his brows furrowed. I mentally curse his parents for the handsome features they bestowed on him. He doesn't deserve them.

"You look at me like I'm a bloodstain on a white shirt. So I'm curious, do I look like the villain in a bedtime story or something?"

There's a scrutinizing look in his eye and I realize that he has no idea what I'm talking about. *Has no one told him that the curse makes him see women incorrectly? Or does he just not care?*

“If you must know, you have a large nose—too large for your face,” he says nonchalantly, green eyes picking me apart with a lazy sort of attention. “Your eyes are small, your eyebrows too bushy. There’s a harsh, rough texture to your hair, and your smile is more of a sneer. Hey, don’t glare at me. You asked.”

“So they haven’t told you that the curse makes you see women as ugly, no matter what they truly look like?” I ask, but by the confused, thoughtful look on his face, I realize that I’m wrong. “They have,” I scoff, disgusted. “You were just too arrogant to take them seriously. How pathetic.”

His expression hardens and I see for the first time the man who was cursed. I don’t know what he did to draw the ire of a Poet, but I can imagine that it had something to with this anger I see pouring out of him.

“Pathetic?” he sneers, shutting his book. “No, pathetic is waltzing into my manor looking like something someone pulled up from the dirt. Pathetic is stalking the grounds, making useless escape attempts when you’ve been told not to bother. Pathetic is hounding me for my attention when I find you uninteresting and unattractive. If I’m pathetic, then we’re a matched set, because sweetheart, you’re as pathetic as they come.”

Then he snatches up his book and leaves the room without a backward glance. I sit there for a while, waiting for my heart to stop racing and the red to recede from my vision.

I’ve been taunted before; I know what cruelty is. But there’s something about Alistair and the cavalier way he delivers it.

Maybe it’s because I suspect he has nothing to gain from my hurt. He doesn’t want to control me or own me. He just doesn’t have any use for things that don’t give him a better view or a nicer seat at the table.

He'll regret that. They always do.

Greed is all the same, whether it's a greed for women, prestige, money or vanity. I've heard it all before. And every time, it's the greed that kills them. It makes them arrogant and glib, revealing their own weaknesses to me without even realizing it.

*'Keep your snooping away from my room and the library.'* Idiot. He may as well have painted me a map to his most sensitive places. *I expected more.*

I sit in the dining room for a few more minutes, finishing my meal and giving Alistair time to get to wherever he spends his evenings. Once I'm done, I don't go to the kitchen like I have the last few nights.

The staff are always so hopeful when they see me, but the moment they hear of my silent dinner with Alistair, they deflate. I don't know what they expect me to do with him, but I don't feel like disappointing them tonight.

I do, however, feel like teaching Alistair a lesson.

A smile pulls at my lips as I stride into the library. I haven't seen it yet as I've mostly been exploring outside to find a means of escape. But now that I've deemed escape futile, it's time to get familiar with the inside of the manor.

Starting with Alistair's personal space.

It wasn't hard to figure out which rooms mean the most to him given that Alistair proclaimed the east wing of the manor as his. *Yet another mistake on his part.* Never reveal your heart to your enemy or that's where they will strike first.

I find it slightly strange that a man like Alistair places so much emotional attachment on a library, but I don't take the time to question it. Whether he finds books to be a distraction, a mark of prestige or

something else, I don’t care. The point is that it’s important to him, and that’s all I need to know.

The room is large and filled to the brim with books. I note that the windows are covered in here just as they are in most other places in the manor. One day I’ll get the staff to tell me why.

There’s a table to my right, filled with books and notes, a quill and ink sitting beside a stack of parchment. A meow draws my attention and I find a large orange cat curled up on a half pulled-out chair, blinking at me with wide green eyes.

“Don’t mind me,” I assure it, “I’m just here to cause your master a bit of trouble. But surely he annoys you too, so you won’t mind, will you?”

I crouch down, lifting my hand a few inches from the cat’s face. It watches me for a moment and then sniffs my fingers before pushing its little nose at my hand. I tentatively brush the soft hair on its snout, and the cat lets out a little purr. I smile. It only took seven years, but I’ve finally made a friend that I can trust.

“You’ll never lie to me, will you?” I tease, standing to survey the options. Most of the books on the tables have to do with history or geography. “Alright, I think Alistair could use a little bit of resistance in his life, don’t you?”

The cat meows and I hand it a handkerchief from the table that it batts at like a toy.

I’m not a particularly vindictive person, but I do get a bit of morbid happiness from teaching someone cruel a lesson. So, it’s with glee that I rearrange Alistair’s books, swapping them for romances and children’s stories. Then I snap the charcoal on the table into bits too small to use and pour his ink into bottles that have openings too small to dip a quill in.

It doesn’t erase the things I’ve endured at cruelty’s selfish hands, but it does bring me a small sense of control. I couldn’t rebel so obviously with Paul or the duke. But I don’t fear Alistair.

He’s selfish and arrogant and I’m certain that he sees everything and everyone as an opportunity, but I don’t believe for a second that he would hurt me without genuine cause. At least I can count on that much while I’m here.

Knowing that his reaction won’t be dangerous, though likely dramatic, I gleefully disrupt his library. And it feels so good.

# Chapter 8

## Stella

### i knew you were trOuble

"I heard him practicing to ask you to go for a stroll after dinner," Becca laughs, winking at Maddy. The youngest maid blushes, hiding her face behind her fair blonde hair as Becca giggles.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Maddy says quietly, her eyes directed at the vase she's currently dusting by a window in the third-floor hallway.

I try to appear unconcerned as I make my way toward them. It's been a week since I came to the manor. So far, everyone has been welcoming, yet I can tell that they're being cautious with their words.

And who can blame them? 'You have the eyes of a packless wolf,' the duke once said when we first met. 'Desperate, independent and ready to run at any moment.' And he was right. I've attempted to run seven times in the years since I met him.

I tug on my sleeves, seven scars hidden on the underside of my forearm. I won't be getting an eighth. *I'll die first.*

Which is probably why the staff at the manor have been so wary of me. Lone wolves are dangerous. They'll bite the hand that feeds them simply

because they don’t know what trust is anymore.

I can’t remember the last time it felt safe enough to trust someone. Not even with kind people like these.

“Miss Stella,” Christine smiles as I approach, pushing a strand of dark honey colored hair from her face, her countenance welcoming. At twenty, she’s the oldest of the three young maids. The three sisters were orphaned young and Christine has taken on the role of mothering the other two like a natural. “It’s nice to see you. How are you settling in now that it’s been a week?”

“I’m feeling a little less overwhelmed,” I answer honestly, sliding my hands into the pockets of my pants. I still don’t wear anything besides the clothes I came with—other than the soft pajamas they leave out for me every night. There are clothes in the wardrobe I could wear, and I even suspect that Franchesca has made a few new items specifically for me, but I don’t wear them.

*Like I said, trust issues.*

“That’s good,” Christine nods. “Have you been able to find your way around the manor?”

“Yes, I think I have it mostly memorized now. It took me a few days to stop confusing the kitchen hallway for the one outside the yellow parlor, and the doors to the dining room are remarkably similar to the ballroom doors.”

All three girls chuckle. “The manor is a bit confusing if you’re not used to it,” Becca agrees, pushing her auburn ponytail over her shoulder.

“So what’s this I hear about someone being invited on a walk?” I ask, turning to Maddy.

The young girl's cheeks go pink beneath her freckles, and she bites her lip to conceal a smile. "Nothing. It's just rumors."

"I wouldn't be so sure," I shrug, allowing myself a little fun. Of everyone here, I think I can safely rule these three out as potential threats.

Maddy's eyes light up, and all at once her fifteen years are showing with vibrancy. She's so eager and innocent. I almost hate for her to like a boy at all. That's when life starts to get more complicated.

"What do you mean?" she demands excitedly, her blonde hair bobbing. "Did he say something?"

"Well—we are talking about Carson, aren't we?" I clarify. Maddy nods. Carson and David are Tilda's sons, but Carson is the older of the two. "I didn't hear anything about a walk, but I *did* see him watching you during breakfast this morning."

Maddy rolls her eyes. "Oh, that's not proof of anything."

"He didn't eat," I point out. "He actually brought his fork to his mouth with no food on it and bit it before he realized it was empty. He's besotted."

Maddy's face says she's pleased even though her words insist she's not. "He's not *besotted*."

"Mhm," Becca and Christine hum, grinning.

The girls continue to tease each other, and I watch, slightly jealous. I had already ceased these kinds of relationships by the time I was Maddy's age. *Such a shame*. I think I would have liked just being fifteen and nothing else.

"So, what are you up to today, Miss Stella?" Becca asks once they've embarrassed Maddy to their satisfaction.

“I’m exploring today,” I say, looking around at the wide hall, what little sunlight that comes through the curtained windows reflecting on the marble floors. “I want to find out more about who Alistair was before he came here. I’m hoping that if I can better understand *why* he was cursed, I can break it.”

“You want to break the curse?” Christine asks, wise enough to be skeptical. I haven’t exactly hidden my dislike of Alistair, and doing something that benefits him doesn’t really fit with my opinions of him.

I feign innocence. “Of course. The sooner he’s free, the sooner I’m free. I would assume that if his curse is broken, so is mine.”

The girls nod thoughtfully but don’t offer up any information. They’re all too loyal to their master to disparage him, and they seem to think that telling me too much information will ruin their chances of breaking the curse.

But I didn’t expect them to tell me anything. I just needed to get them on the topic.

“Well, I’m off. I’ll see you girls later,” I say kindly, smiling as I continue down the hallway.

I feel their stares on my back as I turn the corner, letting my footfalls hit heavy on the polished floors. Once I’ve gone a few paces, I silently turn back and lean against the wall, just barely out of sight.

“She can’t find anything by looking around, right?” I hear Becca say, her voice heavy with concern.

“What would she find?” Christine says calmly, handling the situation with maternal instincts beyond her years. “There’s no evidence here of the master’s past behavior. He would never allow it. We’re hardly allowed to speak of it, and only when we’re sure to not be overheard.”

“But what if she’s heard something about him before she came here?” Maddy argues hesitantly. “She might find something here that causes her to connect the dots.”

Christine scoffs. “I highly doubt the master’s brother would allow stories of the master to run rampant in the city. Otherwise, people would show up looking for him. No, I think the master’s brother has seen to it that the master is never spoken of. I doubt Stella has ever heard anything about him. And nothing she finds in the manor could possibly be incriminating.”

“Sure, but Stella isn’t like the other women who’ve stayed here,” Becca points out. “She’s much cleverer.”

“And she’s brave,” Maddy announces affectionately.

I feel a warmth bloom in my chest at the words and try to brush them off. The last thing I need is to form an attachment to the people here. Not when I plan to leave as soon as possible. I would love to believe that I could hide here forever and never worry about the duke ever again.

But I would be trading one prison for another. One cage rusted and cold and the other gilded and cushioned. A cage is still a cage, and I’m tired of seeing life through bars, regardless of whether they’re sparkly or rusted.

“She is,” Becca agrees resolutely, “But there have been other women who were brave enough to argue with the master too. Remember Jessica? She wasn’t afraid of anything, and she put him in his place all the time.”

Christine laughs. “He hated her so much.”

“I know, I loved it,” Becca replies, a smile in her voice. “But Stella seems even more determined than Jessica was. She’s persistent. I don’t think it would take much for her to figure out why the master was cursed.”

“But we don’t even know the true reason,” Christine points out. “Yes, the master has a history of turning a blind eye to his brother’s bad behavior,

but who knows if that's why he was cursed or not."

There's a pause and I hear their feet shuffle. "You're right," Maddy agrees quietly. "And it does us no good to dwell on it anyway. We chose to be here, and now his curse is just as much ours as it is his. So we can do nothing but wish for his success."

The other girls agree and I ready myself to move along when Becca speaks up. "Did you hear the master talk about the men who were searching the village yesterday?" she whispers, and I have to lean to the edge of the wall to hear her.

"Yes," Maddy gasps, "The master said that they were looking for someone but were very cagey about who. What if it's someone dangerous?"

"It doesn't matter," Christine says, shutting down the conversation. "The manor is impenetrable when one of the girls are here."

"*Mostly* impenetrable," Becca corrects ominously. "Anyone who share's blood with the master can still enter the gates."

Christine sighs, and I imagine her making a look of motherly disapproval. "We never get such visitors, and since no one else can visit right now, we're safe."

The girls shuffle off and I stand paralyzed. The men searching in the village are almost certainly Jareth and his men. They may be unable to get to me while I'm stuck in the manor, but when the three months are up…

*I have to break this curse.*

I'm about to push off the wall and begin my search of the manor, when a hand clamps over my mouth.

Strong fingers press my shoulder into the wall, and I glare up into Alistair's green eyes.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you that eavesdropping is impolite?” he whispers, leaning too close.

Unbidden, memories enter my mind of a hand squeezing my chin as a knife presses against my side. I can still smell his breath as he leans closer, his fingers bruising my jaw. ‘Your independence makes you clever, Little Wolf. But I can snap that part of you off if it becomes a problem,’ he said, and I knew by the cold look in his eye that he meant it.

Out of hard-earned instinct, I slip the knife from under the edge of my bodice, pushing it against Alistair’s chest. I know it’s his eyes I’m seeing and not the duke’s. I know I’m at the manor and not the castle.

But some habits die slowly.

“Easy there, Huntress,” he says quietly, releasing his hold on me. “I wasn’t going to hurt you.”

“Word to the wise,” I hiss, stowing the knife away, “Wild animals don’t see the difference between offered affection and threatened abuse. To us, they both look like raised hands.”

There’s a twitch in his brows and for the first time, his curiosity appears deeper than a desire for entertainment. I’ve become a puzzle he wants to solve, and I wonder if it was a wise shift to make.

“What kind of wild animal are you then?” he asks, crossing his arms with the air of a man who has all day to ask as many questions as he wants.

“Whichever one the situation calls for,” I shrug, stowing the knife away.

Alistair shakes his head, smirking. “No. You might disguise yourself as something sweet like a bunny or a puppy, but I think deep down you’re something with claws and teeth.”

I look him over, unimpressed with his typical ‘too self-involved to care’ attitude that I’ve seen on a hundred other men’s faces. “Then maybe you

should keep your distance so I don't claw you," I retort with a sugary sweet smile.

He laughs, the sound nothing but a breath. "Thank you, by the way, for the damage you did in my library. I have to admit I didn't expect something so clever."

My smile turns real and I'm glad to know that my trick bothered him enough that he's mentioning it. "What, did my new cataloguing system mess you up? Can't you tell the difference between Pierre DeLuca and Saint Venino without the labels on the shelves telling you which section you're in?"

"You read?" The words are said with such shock that I have no choice but to be offended.

"I know, it's almost as surprising as the fact that you can speak without insulting me."

He cocks his head, giving me a dry look. "You showed up here with twigs in your hair, dirt on your face and wearing clothes that didn't look like they'd been washed in a month. You might as well have been a wild animal."

"As a man who's face doesn't even begin to describe the evil within, you should know that looks can be deceiving."

His smile grows into a grin and I hate that I've given him another reason to be cocky. *As if he needed it.*

"Aw, Beasty, does that mean you think I'm handsome?"

I roll my eyes and walk away, but he follows. "I knew you were trouble," I mumble.

"So what did you think of what they said?" he asks.

“Who? Pierre DeLuca?” I say, being purposefully obtuse. “Personally, I think his theories about Poets secretly plotting to take over the continent are a little far fetched, but I agree with his position on the danger of undocumented artifacts.”

“Okay, we’re coming back to what you know about explorers in a moment,” he says, eyeing me with renewed interest. “But I want to know what you think about everything the *maids* said.”

“They have names, you know. They’re Maddy, Becca and Christa.”

“Christine,” he says automatically. Realizing his mistake, he stills and flicks his eyes to me. “I think.”

“Mhm. So, you know the names of your staff but pretend that you don’t.” I hold up my fingers, ticking off everything I’ve learned so far. “Your most treasured place in the manor is a library, you own a somewhat overweight cat, and you’re so wrapped up in yourself that I don’t think you realized your curse impeded your sight when it comes to women until I told you.”

He shrugs, the picture of an unbothered man. “And?”

“Nothing. Just mentally keeping track of all the facts.”

I think he’s going to pester me about what I’ve decided about him so far, but instead he stuffs his hands in his pockets and looks straight ahead. “So what did you think of the things you overheard, Stella?” he asks again.

I look at him and he winks. “I pay attention to everything, not just the things that are about me,” he smirks.

“For your own gain, no doubt,” I quip. “And as for what the girls said…I don’t know. Clearly, they feel enough loyalty toward you to have chosen to stay here and be cursed with you, and they don’t speak negatively of you in front of me.”

“So does that mean that I’m not a complete nightmare?”

“No, you might just be a good manipulator.”

Alistair sighs and shakes his head. “You’re looking on the dim side of life, Snow Cat. That might be your problem right there.”

“My problem is that I’m stuck in this manor with a man obsessed with his own reflection and the works of every Poet, geographer, and treasure hunter known to man.”

“Speaking of that, what do you know about artifacts?” he asks, arms crossed and gaze studious. I ignore him, feigning interest in the draped windows we pass and the occasional table holding a vase or gilded plate or some other useless knickknack.

“No more than anyone else, I assume.”

He looks unconvinced. “What about Pierre? Do you think he ever knew where the gold rings were, or do you think he just made it up?”

“Well, the rings were certainly real.”

“How do you know?”

“How else would King Reinsford be in Carakass, Montaign, *and* here in Andaria at the same time? He was documented by multiple different people in each location in the same week. And Carakass is all the way on the other side of Dunrow. There’s no way he could have managed such a feat without the rings.”

“A Poet could have helped him.”

I shake my head. I’m much more well versed in this topic than he thinks I am. The duke was obsessed with the twelve gold rings of the huntress, and I’ve searched for them on more than one occasion at his behest. *Thank God I never found them.*

“At that time, it’s extremely unlikely,” I argue. “King Reinsford came into power right after the Poets vanished. They didn’t begin to pop back up

again until the two hundredth year of the second age, nearly one hundred and fifty years later. No, King Reinsford had to have used an artifact and the only ones that make sense are the rings."

Alistair is quiet, and I can feel his eyes on my face. But I don't look at him.

"Alright Tigress," he says, a smile in his voice. "I get it. There's more to you than wild desperation."

"You mean a person can have multiple layers? No," I gasp sarcastically, giving him a dry look.

He chuckles, but I don't trust the sound. There's something so curated about Alistair. Like every breath he takes is chosen on purpose to further endear me or intimidate me depending on his desired outcome. But I won't be swayed.

"Armor up all you want, but I'll figure you out, Stella," he says. Then he winks and saunters off down the hall, leaving me feeling even more unsure than I did before.

# Chapter 9

## Alistair

### everybody loves me

Stella is still ugly, but at least she's clean.

She sits at the other end of the long dining table, a book in her hands that I have no doubt she stole from the library I specifically told her to stay out of. I have to admit though that I enjoyed her prank. It's been a long time since someone messed with me like that, and I forgot how much fun it could be.

I watch her as she reads, trying to figure her out. She's still wearing the same clothes she showed up here in, but at least they're free of dirt stains now. Her hair is wound into a braid that lays across her left shoulder, but it has a mind of its own and bits of it have escaped around her face.

The strands look rough to the touch, and her features are too harsh, too blunt to be appealing. It's almost like someone took features from five different people and shoved them all together regardless of how they fit.

*But is that her real face?*

After her outburst at dinner last night, I began to replay the last four years in my mind. I vaguely remember Milly mentioning something about

the looks of the women, but I didn't pay much attention. What did it matter to me how the curse affected the women?

But now I'm wondering what all those women really looked like…Some of them had been vocal like Stella, asking questions or trying to flirt, and I recall mentioning on occasion how unattractive I found them.

*Now that I'm thinking about it though, they also seemed confused by the comments.* Like they were surprised that I found them physically lacking. And Stella asked if she appeared like a banshee *to me.* As if she appeared different to everyone else…

"What do you really look like?" I ask, breaking the echoing silence.

Stella's eyes flash to me, surprised.

"Are your eyes really green? Or is that just…the curse?" I go on, trying to sound as uninvested as possible. Judging by the subtle smile on her lips, I've failed.

"Why do you want to know?" she asks, slowly setting her book on the table.

She's a guarded creature, never exposing too much of herself and always ready to fight. But she sometimes forgets to put up her walls, especially when she's entertained. Which seems to be primarily when she thinks she has the upper hand.

"I don't like the thought that the curse has been stealing my own sight from me," I answer evasively.

Her eyes narrow and her finger taps the corner of her book. "What do I get if I tell you?"

A grin escapes me despite my prior intentions not to enjoy her presence. Joy leads to attachment, and attachments are just weaknesses with smiles.

"Is there something you want, my Lady Lion?"

Her eyes narrow at the nickname and my smile expands. I haven't had this kind of fun in *years*. I should have toyed with the other women who stayed here, seen if they puffed up when prodded the way Stella does.

She twirls the stem of her glass, eyeing me. The way she leans against the table, lips pursed, I feel like *I'm* the one who's a guest in *her* home. So I mimic her posture to let her know that she's not the one running this show. She's just one of my thespians.

"Tell me everything you know about the curse," she says after a few moments.

"Deal," I scoff, waving my hand dismissively. "But in exchange, you have to answer *all* of my questions about your appearance."

"Deal."

"Are your eyes green?"

She smiles, setting her chin on her hand. "Yes."

"Your hair?"

"No, first you tell me one thing about the curse. Tit for tat, Princess."

I laugh at her jab and try to think of some obscure, unimportant detail. "I'm bound by magic to come to this dining room every night at sunset."

Her smile turns to a glare. "That's not fair, I already knew that."

"You didn't specify that my information had to be new," I remind her, sipping on my water.

She growls and I can't help but compare her to Narcissus, my orange tabby cat. Temperamental, unpredictable, too curious for their own good. *They could be siblings.*

"Now tell me what your hair is like," I request lazily, not wanting to let her know how desperately I want her answer.

She rolls her eyes, her fingers moving from her glass to the tail of her braid. “It’s dark, medium length.”

“And the texture?”

She squints at me, and I try not to fidget under her gaze. “It’s sort of… wavy with a little bit of curl.”

“Is it soft? Does it look soft?”

“Um…” she looks at the tail of her braid, brow wrinkled. “Yeah, it’s soft. It gets kind of frizzy in the heat, but it looks soft right now. Why? What does it look like to you?”

“Rough. Are you pretty?”

Her expression falls and I get the sense I’ve disappointed her somehow. *And I wasn’t even trying.* “Not particularly. I’m easily overlooked, not necessarily as ugly as you seem to think I am, but I wouldn’t turn your head. Now tell me more about the curse.”

I don’t know why her answer bothers me. Perhaps I hoped she was pretty underneath the curse. But for what reason, I can’t fathom. I have no use for beauty when what I need is an escape.

“As you already know, we’re both stuck here,” I groan, stretching my neck. “I can only leave the grounds at certain times, and you can’t leave until three months have passed.”

“What else?”

“Apparently all the women appear ugly to me for some reason that wasn’t disclosed to me when that hellish Poet cursed me.”

“Who was the Poet?”

“Don’t know.” I mindlessly spin the water in my glass. “I would recognize her if I saw her again, but as I’m sure you’re aware, Poets are quite rare and very difficult to find. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“Why did she curse you?”

“Why don’t you ask the maids?” I toss back at her with a smirk.

To her credit, she doesn’t appear guilty about the snooping she did earlier. And I respect her for it. If you’re going to make unpopular choices, commit to them. *That’s why everybody loves me, I never apologize.* Or at least that’s what I tell myself.

I see her reaching for her book and suddenly I don’t want her to go. Not because I like her company—*of course not*—I just haven’t gotten to the point of the conversation yet.

“I have a proposition for you,” I blurt, silently cursing myself for my lack of tact. I’m usually quite good at this.

“I’m not that kind of kitty,” she sasses, her green eyes flashing as she smirks, willfully misinterpreting my words.

“I’m not sure you’re a kitty at all. You might be a bear—a grizzly.”

She chuckles. It’s not a bad sound, as far as laughs go.

“Your book is from my library,” I nod to the tome in her hands, “But I’ll let it go seeing as how we might benefit each other.”

“How’s that? Do you want me to read you a bedtime story?”

“If you promise to keep the claws in. I won’t have my sheets shredded.”

“Oh, I’ll shred something.”

I laugh, loving her quick wit. It’s unfortunate that I couldn’t have more time by myself between female visitors, but at least this one is entertaining.

“I’m looking for a way around the curse,” I explain, getting to the point before she can bolt for the door. “I hired a Poet a few years ago to tell me how to do it, and he assured me that there is a way. But it’s proven difficult to find. A second set of eyes, however, may be useful.”

As I speak, Stella leans forward in her chair, her interest unmasked. “Why me?” she asks cautiously.

“You are clearly well versed in history and what I need requires historical knowledge. No one else in the manor is as fluent in it.”

She’s quiet for a moment, and then she smiles. “You’re looking for an artifact, aren’t you? That’s why you asked me so many questions about artifacts earlier.”

While I didn’t intend to tell her more than necessary before she accepts my proposition, I should have known that she was smart enough to puzzle some of it out on her own.

“Finding it means we’re all free,” I say, sidestepping her question. “You, me, the staff. You won’t have to wait the standard three months if we can get around the curse now.”

She considers me silently and I have no idea what her answer will be. There’s a dancing way about Stella. One step forward, two to the side, one step back. She’s making up the rhythm as she goes, and I don’t know which way she’ll move next.

“I’ll think about it,” she says, standing, a serene smile on her face. The knowledge that the curse has altered her appearance hasn’t made her any less unattractive. But I’m finding it less unpleasant to look at her now that I know it’s not completely real.

“Fine,” I shrug, leaning back in my chair. “If you decide to help, I’m in the library every day.”

“Fine. If I decide to help, I’ll let you know.”

When she turns to the door, a book tucked under her arm, I glare at her back. A weaker person would crumble at my fake disinterest. But not

Stella. In fact, as she walks away, I wonder which one of us truly has the upper hand.

*Somehow, I don't think it's me.*

# Chapter 10

## Stella

### memories feel like weaPons

Alistair's proposition echoed in my mind all night, as did the girls' words about men searching the village. If I'm right and it's Jareth looking for me, then my time is running out. Which means that Alistair's artifact may be my best way to freedom.

But I can't afford to be reckless.

Before I can agree to Alistair's offer, I need to be sure of who I'm dealing with. So I dress quickly and slip out of my room without a sound, heading for the east wing.

I make quick work of finding Alistair's room, pulling the pin from my hair to work on the lock. I've been in the manor long enough now to know that Alistair isn't in his room. He starts every day with a swim in the lake before the sun has a chance to rise. One glance outside tells me that I should have half an hour before he comes back in.

But I won't need it. A few seconds is all it takes for me to get the door open to reveal Alistair's quarters.

The sitting room itself is large enough for two bedrooms. There's a fireplace on the right, with a couch and chairs arranged for lounging and a few end tables with unlit lanterns. Beyond that is another door, this one leading to the bedroom.

His bed is similar to mine, with a green silk canopy draped above it and an inordinate number of plush pillows. There's also a wardrobe, a desk, a dresser, a tub, and a second fireplace.

But my eyes fall to the desk.

If Alistair were to keep secrets—which I'm certain he does—they would most likely be hidden in the furniture. As I reach for the drawers, my eyes flit to the nearby window. I can just barely see Alistair out in the dark, the sky a slightly lighter shade of blue as the sun gets closer to rising. He's all shadows out in early morning, but I can see enough of him to know he's stripped down to his pants.

Suddenly I'm grateful that he swims in the dark, because my cheeks are already flaming, and I think if I saw his entire upper body in full light, I would combust on the spot.

He looks so human striding out into the water. I wonder if he even feels the cold. He doesn't pause as he walks deeper and deeper, finally submerging himself completely in the small lake.

As I watch him, a part of me almost feels bad for snooping in his space. Someone like Alistair certainly doesn't trust many, and this is just proof that he can't trust me.

But trust is a double-edged sword, giving both people the tool required to cut bone deep. That's what makes it trust, believing that the other person will never use it as a weapon against you.

I’m confident neither of us will ever feel that type of safety with one another.

Affirmed in my decision, I yank the desk drawers open. I make quick work of my search, careful to put everything back exactly where it came from. This isn’t my first time snooping through someone’s things. But all I find in the desk are more notes about Alistair’s search for an artifact and a few letters from his mother.

Those I don’t read. I’m here to find anything that might indicate Alistair can’t be trusted, not to breach his emotional privacy.

His dresser is likewise empty of information. Though I do discover that he has almost as many shirts as there are days in the year. *What a princess.*

Next, I try his nightstand, but all he stores there is parchment and charcoal. I’m about to give up when I find a letter sitting under a book on a table in the sitting room.

I flip it open just to see who it’s from and my eyes catch on the name signed at the bottom.

*Brother,*

*Another year of captivity under your belt. You must be quite the professional at handling isolation now. I’m disappointed to hear that you haven’t had any luck getting around the curse. I expected more from you.*

*But I’ve managed fine in your absence. The people are quite accustomed to my rule now. I daresay they have more fear for me than they do for their own God. It’s a pleasant feeling to say the least. But I have to admit that I haven’t done it alone.*

*I have a pet that does quite a bit of the dirty work for me, though it would be a useless mutt without my instruction. I’ll introduce you when you get*

*home. Which I hope will be soon as I plan to make my move on the capital, and having you take my seat would do a great deal to ease my mind.*

*Take care, Brother.*

*And by the way, I have no further news in the search for mother. Whoever took her is going to great lengths to hide her from me. But worry not. I will bring her home.*

*-Your brother, Orrin, Duke of Roburry*

The parchment shakes in my hand, and I have to try three times to fold it back up, replacing it on the table. Fear pulses through my veins and it's with trembling legs that I collapse onto the couch.

I knew it was a long shot that Alistair wouldn't have ghosts of his own. But I never expected that we would share one.

I didn't even know that the duke's brother was still alive. Orrin has always implied that his brother died while traveling, and I never questioned it.

*What is Orrin up to?* And more importantly, how long will it be before he comes here himself to search for me? The girls did say that only someone who shares blood with Alistair can enter the grounds while a woman is staying here. *Meaning that Orrin can come for me at any time.*

*If* Alistair tells him about me. Which he doesn't have reason to do. At least not right now.

I'm sure Orrin is aware of the string of girls that come to the manor. But to Alistair, I'm just another one of many. He doesn't know that I'm the pet his brother speaks of in his letter.

He doesn't know what his brother did to me, or how those memories feel like weapons poised for the kill, even now.

**Three years ago…**

*When I arrived at the inn earlier, I asked for my meal to be sent to my room instead of eating downstairs, and I kept my hood up and gave a fake name. I haven't opened the door since the maid brought the food, and I've ensured that it's locked. Yet I still find myself drawing the curtains on the single window, pacing the floor, half expecting my past to pop up from the fireplace.*

*Speaking of fire…I cringe at the sight of the flames but force myself to stare them down. I can't be afraid of fire for the rest of my life. It would be a tell that I can't afford to have.*

*If I'm to start over, I can't give anyone a reason to suspect me. Not even one so small.*

*"You're fine, Stella," I whisper, though the words don't penetrate my anxiety or stop the shaking in my fingers. "It's been long enough. If they were going to come for you, they would have already."*

*But I can't count on it. I'm so close to freedom. So close to starting fresh. Just one more day's ride and I'll be out of the country completely. One more day and I can breathe easy for the first time in years.*

*"Miss," the housekeeper's voice calls from the hall, making me freeze in place.*

*"Yes?" I call back hesitantly. My gut twists and my fear intensifies.*

*"I have some fresh linens for you. I've been informed by one of the maids that the sheets in your room weren't cleaned."*

*I inspect the bed, finding a few stains on the bedding. Admittedly, I'm not fond of the idea of sleeping on them as I can't identify what caused them.*

*But I still hesitate in front of the door, unsure if it's wise to open it.*

*"Are you alone?" I ask.*

*"Yes miss."*

*But before my hand can grasp the handle, my instincts scream louder that this isn't right. This establishment isn't exactly the nicest on the street. I imagine they don't have sheets that are free of stains.*

They've come for me.

*Heart racing, I grab my bag off the floor and bolt to the window, glad I'd been too restless to take off my shoes.*

*I have the window sash halfway up when the bedroom door bangs open. I don't even turn to see the intruder, hurrying to throw myself out the window.*

*A hand latches onto my shoulder before I can manage it, and I'm yanked back into the room and thrown to the ground.*

*I twist to my knees, my knife already brandished in my hand. Five guards in black crowd the room, all of them with swords drawn. And one blocks the window.*

*Panic squeezes my chest, but I refuse to cry. The fight isn't over until I have no breath left to breathe. I've survived worse.*

*Slow footsteps echo around the room and the guards part to allow a man to walk into the circle. He's young, with dark hair and blue eyes. He's objectively handsome with sharp features and a strong jaw, but a shiver runs through me at the sight of him.*

*There's a danger about him, and I suddenly miss my stepfather. Somehow I think he was a kitten compared to this lion.*

*"Stella Renaud," the man says, his voice deep and smooth—sharp like the edge off a knife.*

*"It's Freemont," I argue automatically.*

*The tilt of his lips is more of a threat than it is a smile. "Ah. I see."*

*He walks to the bed, looking at it before deciding not to sit. Instead, he crouches before me, studying me with a scrutiny I don't like.*

*"Do you know who I am?"*

*"The duke," I answer reluctantly, swallowing back my panicked breaths.*

*"Indeed. And I am in need of some help."*

*I don't reply, my mind trying to find a way out of the room. The housekeeper is nowhere to be found and I can't blame her. I would want to be as far from the duke and his men as I could too.*

*"You see, I'm on a trajectory, if you will. Toward glory." He smiles like he's trying to be friendly, but the expression falls far from it, looking feral. "But there are obstacles in my way. Obstacles that I cannot remove myself without making things messy. Which is where you come in."*

"I'm *an obstacle?" I ask incredulously.*

*I'm not prepared for the hand that flies forward, smacking me across the face. It knocks me back and I sit on my backside, more shocked than anything. It's the second time I've been hit by a man, and it didn't bode well for the last guy.*

*I vow that it won't end well for this one either.*

*"Do not interrupt. You have fire, Stella," the duke says sternly. "That will serve you well in my employ. But that fire will be under* my *control. Do you understand? You may use as much heat as you see fit to accomplish the jobs I give you, but you will keep it in check where I am concerned." He leans close, and I resist the urge to flinch. "Do you understand?"*

*When he raises his hand again, I cave. "Yes, I understand."*

*"Good."*

*"What…" I pause, waiting for him to nod. I don't fancy getting hit twice. I'll need to live another day if I'm going to make sure he never hits me*

*again. “What do you want me to do?”*

*His unhinged smile returns. “Remove obstacles, of course. By any means necessary.”*

And that was the beginning of my end. From that day on, I was a dog on a leash. I stole, destroyed property, spread lies, ruined reputations, anything the duke told me to do. I tried to resist him at first, but I learned quickly that the effort was futile.

Any attempts I made to reject his requests resulted in the deaths of innocents. I only had to be punished that way twice before I realized that obedience was best not only for my survival, but everyone else’s.

I was slow to let in the desperation, stubbornly resisting, but I eventually let my fire dampen. I learned quickly that fueling an inferno was dangerous and exhausting, but I could nurture a single ember. Keep it burning until the day came when I could let it loose in dry brush and watch it burn.

And when my moment came, I took it. *I’m not going back.*

And now that I know Alistair is Orrin’s brother, helping him around the curse has a whole different meaning. Because if Alistair is as bad as his brother, then he deserves to rot in the manor. And if he isn’t, then maybe he can dethrone his brother and save the rest of us the grief of Orrin’s rule.

But all I really know is that Orrin could show up at any moment, and if helping Alistair is my fastest way out, then I think I have to take it…

# Chapter 11

## Stella

### burIed down deep inside

I'm sitting at Alistair's table the next day, his cat curled up in my lap, when he waltzes into the library. He smirks when he sees me, and I already regret agreeing to spend more time in his presence. He's going to be insufferably glib now.

"I have conditions," I say with no preamble, the orange cat purring as I scratch his head. At least I think it's a him. I'm not brave enough to check.

"You wouldn't be you if you didn't, Snow Cat," Alistair grins, happily collapsing into the chair diagonal from me. His eyes belatedly fly to his pet, who simply eyes Alistair with a cold detachment that makes me believe the two have been together for a long time.

"I'm not sure how I feel about you stealing the affection of the only being that loves me though," he says, glaring at the cat. "I expected some form of loyalty from you, Narcissus."

"Narcissus?"

"Yes, he's quite self-obsessed."

I snort, wondering if he knows he's the mirror image of a cat, or if it's just a happy accident of fate.

"Now what are these conditions that I'm probably going to say no to?" he asks, crossing his leg so his ankle rests on his knee. All he's missing is a beam of sunlight to fall across his face and he would make a perfect portrait. But most of the windows in the manor are strangely closed and I have yet to convince anyone to tell me why.

"First of all, no more snide remarks about the appearance of any of the women in the manor," I say pointedly.

Alistair lays a hand across his chest, an expression of mock incredulity on his face. "Not even to compliment them?"

"Have you ever complimented anyone on their looks in this manor?"

He smirks, green eyes sparkling with mischief. "No. But a man can surprise you every now and again."

"Unlikely. The second condition should go without saying, but you and I will maintain a professional relationship. In other words, I will cut off any part of you that touches me."

He raises his eyebrows, eyeing me with interest. "I touch Kitty and Kitty will claw me. Got it. What else?"

I sigh. "You have to promise that if this artifact that will supposedly get around the curse does not free the staff, you will find another way to free them, no matter the cost."

Alistair tilts his head thoughtfully. "What, no demands that I promise to free you at any cost too?"

"Even if we don't find an artifact that can free me, I will be free in three months. And let's be honest, any promise you make to help me isn't worth much."

“And a promise I make to help the staff is?”

“You know their names,” I point out, recalling the way he tried to brush it off. “I think you care about their freedom, but I want you to swear to it or I won’t help you.”

He taps his finger on the table, his gaze studious and unmoving. When he nods, I release the breath I’d been holding. “Fine. I promise that I will not rest until the staff are free of the curse, no matter the cost. Are we square?”

“We’re square.”

“Good, then it’s my turn.”

I scowl at him, and my hands automatically curl into fists. Narcissus squeezes his claws into my legs, displeased by my lack of attention.

“You have conditions? I’m the one doing you a favor.”

“Ah, but there’s where you’re wrong,” Alistair argues. “We will both benefit from finding the artifact. But don’t worry, my condition isn’t anything bad.”

When he says nothing else, I shove his leg with my foot. “Get on with it.”

He grins, getting more comfortable in his chair. “Whatever happens, you can’t fall in love with me.”

I bark out a laugh, and Narcissus flinches. Alistair scowls, offended by my reaction, which just makes me laugh harder. I clutch my stomach, trying to catch my breath as I wipe tears from my eyes.

“You don’t have to be rude,” he pouts.

“I’m sorry, but the idea of me falling in love with you is just—I can’t,” I gasp, chuckling. “What a ridiculous idea. That’s like a bunny curling up

with a fox. We would have to be completely insane and totally desperate for such a thing to happen."

"I'm curious, do you consider yourself the fox or the bunny?"

"Guess."

He sighs and snatches up a stack of papers from the table, sifting through them. "Alright Foxy, let's get down to business. The Poet I hired told me that in order to get around this curse and free all of us from the manor, we need a magical object of equal power to the curse itself."

I ignore his annoying animal nickname and lean forward to see the notes he's studying. The handwriting is so atrocious that it looks like a different language. "Is that what the Poet told you?"

"No, a bunny rabbit told it to me in a dream and then revealed herself to be the sister I never knew I had," he replies dryly.

"You asked me for my help because you've had no luck on your own. The best way for me to help is to go over what you already know and see if I notice something that you didn't. Now what were the Poet's words exactly?"

Clearly reluctant to collaborate, he rolls his eyes and hands me the pages, which are covered in only partially coherent scribblings. Quotes from books, names of explorers, questions about artifacts and locations.

"What does this even say? 'play…Gunrow'," I read from the page, only able to make out a few of the letters and the name of the treasure hunter who's responsible for most of Dunrow's wealth, making it the richest of the five kingdoms.

"Plate from Gunrow," Alistair snaps, trying to snatch the pages back. I hold them out of his reach. "It's supposedly blessed with the ability to

show someone the unseen. I thought maybe it could show me how to break the curse, but I think it might be located in Crenshaw."

I look at the page, reading on. "'Guide mirror…of plan?'"

"Gilded mirror of Phantos," Alistair snarls, finally grabbing the pages from my hand. I don't fight him since I can't read any of his notes anyway.

"Okay, first of all, I think I should be our official scribe moving forward," I tease, eyeing his horrible handwriting. "I'll need you to read all of this out loud to me later so I can rewrite it legibly."

"I write perfectly fine—"

"Second of all," I interrupt him, just for the fun of it, "You don't know exactly how the first Poet cursed you, right?"

"If I did, would I be here with you?"

I nod. "Fair enough. What exact words did the second Poet say?"

Alistair runs a hand through his tousled hair, the long strands poking up from between his fingers.

"He said that the curse was a powerful one and that without speaking to the Poet who cast it, he didn't know how it could be broken. *But* he believed that utilizing an artifact of equal power could work around the curse. He said we would find it in the manor."

"In the manor?" I demand, stupefied. Why would a powerful artifact be sitting around in a manor in the middle of nowhere?

Alistair nods. "He swore that it would be here. My…brother stored a lot of things here before he stored me here." He smiles bitterly and I make a mental note of the brothers' apparent animosity. If Alistair doesn't like his brother, then maybe he will be less likely to turn me over to him. "Any artifacts he found that he couldn't find a use for or didn't want someone else to find, he dumped here. So there's a good chance that the artifact we

need is somewhere in these halls. However, this place isn't exactly small and literally anything could be an artifact. So, without knowing what artifact I'm looking for and what it does, trying out each item in the manor would be useless."

"What kind of artifact did the Poet specifically say we need?" I ask, processing this new information.

"He said it needed to be one that could counteract the limitations of the curse that I want to combat. For instance, since the curse contains us in the manor, an artifact that allows people to transport might work against the curse." He growls and shakes his head. "I paid three hundred dulces for that information and it has yet to be helpful."

"You should ask for a refund."

He scowls. "Can you help me or not?"

I stand and move toward the windows. If I had my own way out of here, I wouldn't risk helping Alistair. Not when I know he's Orrin's brother and could turn me over at any moment. But Alistair has no idea who I am. He thinks I'm just another annoying houseguest.

And I need to keep it that way.

Lost in my thoughts, I pull at the curtains on one of the tall windows, only to realize that the fabric is nailed to the window trim. As I tug at the edges, a hand suddenly grabs my wrist and I jump, stumbling back into Alistair.

He stares down at me, his chest pressed against my back and his fingers latched onto my arm. I take a deep breath, reminding the primal part of my mind that while Alistair shares blood with Orrin, they are not the same kind of monsters. Alistair may be a self-absorbed manchild, but he's not the sociopath his brother is.

“You promised not to touch me,” I remind him, pulling my arm away.

He lets me, moving back a step. “You touched my drapes.”

“You never told me not to.”

“I think it should go without saying that something nailed down should not be moved unless you have permission.”

I narrow my eyes at him, and my gaze catches on what looks like a fresh slice on his neck. It’s raw, the size of my pinky and a deep red.

“What happened?” I ask, nodding to the cut.

He smiles dryly. “The last girl nicked me before I got rid of her.”

I tilt my head, unimpressed. “Why do you keep the drapes shut?”

“You’re nosy—you know that, right?”

“Yes.” It’s earned me more than my own fair share of cuts and bruises.

Instead of responding, Alistair turns back to the table and starts sifting through books, pointedly avoiding my gaze. “So, what will it be, Scorpion? Will you help me secure all our freedoms, or are you going to go back to snooping alone?”

I wish I could say no. Alistair is going to be an insufferable research partner. *But I need him.* Even if his humanity is buried down deep inside. *So so deep.*

“Fine. I’ll help.”

# Chapter 12

## Stella

### what did you think i'd sAy to that?

"Denise, has Alistair ever killed any of the girls that were stuck here?" I ask as the friendly housekeeper pours me a cup of tea. Today is the first day that Alistair and I are truly working. The past two days have mostly been spent arguing and rewriting his notes so that I can actually read them.

Denise gives me a horrified look, disapproving of the way I taunt her master. All of the staff disapprove to a degree, but I think they secretly enjoy it.

"Of course not," Denise gasps with wide eyes. Half of her dark hair is pulled into a bun, the rest swishing across her shoulders as she shakes her head. She's younger than Milly by about ten years, but she has a similar maternal, no-nonsense attitude that I admire.

I turn a piercing look on Alistair at her answer, but he ignores me. "Do you hear that, Al?" I taunt him. "Denise says you're a liar."

Denise groans, shaking her head at me. "Now, Miss Stella—"

“Denise, you’re ruining my reputation,” Alistair says with dramatized exasperation. But I’m fairly certain Denise’s own exasperation is real as she sighs and sets a plate of scones on the table, squeezing it between stacks of books and half used bits of charcoal. “I don’t know if the two of you spending time together is wise. You’re liable to start some kind of rebellion,” she warns us, but there’s a smile tugging at her mouth.

“Hm, that sounds fun,” Alistair hums, stroking Narcissus’ back where he lies on the table, wrinkling the pages of an open book. “What should we call our rebellion, Beasty? The Fighting Foxes?”

“How about The Fox and the Flea? I’m the fox and you’re the parasitic insect,” I quip with a smile.

Alistair grins at me. Most men want flirtatious looks and soft giggles from women. All Alistair wants is a good, cutting comeback. *Masochist.*

“I’m leaving before you two start throwing things,” Denise announces, heading for the library door.

“Oh, come on,” Alistair yells after her, “We threw two books yesterday and it was to kill a spider.”

But the woman still leaves, chuckling as she goes. Alistair frowns at her exit. “I’m beginning to fear that my staff don’t respect me anymore.”

“Probably because you insist on wearing those shirts,” I mumble, knowing he’ll hear me.

“What—” he looks down at his blue shirt. “I love this shirt, and I look good in blue.”

“Eh.”

“What do you mean ‘eh’?”

“I think blue washes you out a little bit. But who cares? We have more important things to think about than your appearance.” I pull a stack of

parchment toward me, using a piece of graphite to jot down my notes on Jane Antino's book about the history of Poets. It's a messy way to work, but it's still easier to read than Alistair's smudges.

"I think my appearance is very important," Alistair huffs, pulling his book up closer to his face.

"Stop talking to yourself," I say, rereading the paragraph I just finished writing. "Did you see my notes on the gold ball from Montaign?"

He sighs and takes the pages I offer to him. "'Saint Venino is said to have created a very powerful artifact disguised as a children's toy.' What kind of person gives their child a golden ball to play with?"

I tap his calf with my foot. "Keep reading."

"Yes Miss Stella," he mocks. I want to slap him. "'The full knowledge of the golden ball's powers have been lost to time, but thanks to Venino's personal notes, we know for certain that it allowed a person to transform. It's also suspected that it gave the ability to time travel.'"

Alistair raises his eyes to mine, his gaze contemptuous. "Freckles, you don't really believe that a child's toy really gives someone the ability to time travel do you? I consider myself somewhat of a Poetic expert after four years in this library, and I can confidently say that time travel is one of the things Poetry has never been able to accomplish."

"I'm not saying that the ball can actually accomplish time travel," I explain, pulling the notes back to myself. "But if the ball has anything close to that level of power, then it could be what we're looking for. You read the text, most of the ball's abilities are unknown. And according to Antino's book as well as Venino's own personal journal entries, the last known location of the ball was somewhere in Andonia."

“This is a big country, Stella,” he reminds me as if I’m stupid. “It could be anywhere.”

“The texts list Salvin specifically as being the possible location of the gold ball,” I say, already knowing that the duke visited the city two years ago. He left me in a cell while he was gone, not trusting me to stay put. *He was right.* I tried valiantly to escape the dungeons, but the guards had been warned of my propensity to run and gave me no opportunities. “Has your brother been to Salvin? Is it possible that he would have come across the ball?”

Alistair opens his mouth and then shuts it. His forehead wrinkles and he takes back my notes, looking from them to me. “I…” he shakes his head. “Yes, it’s possible.”

“Then it looks like we have a hunt to begin,” I smile. “Also, I was curious, have you considered searching the grounds for an artifact? There are many Poetic objects that could be used as lawn ornaments or easily hidden in a tree or even buried. We should look outside.”

“No.”

I glance at Alistair, confused by his refusal. But his expression is neutral, his tone dismissive.

“Have you already checked outside?” I ask.

“No.”

“Then why can’t we look?”

“Because I said so.”

“Fine, I’ll look myself.”

He leans forward, his expression hard. “No, you won’t.”

I stare at him, confused by his sudden mood shift. We’ve only been working together for two days, and I wouldn’t dare to call us friends, but

we've been cordial.

"Why don't you want to go outside?" I ask, daring him to be honest with me. "What are you hiding?"

"It's none of your concern, Crocodile," he hisses, glaring at me.

But he's wrong. I've played this game before. I've been given pet names and told only bits and pieces of a story. It was Orrin's way of convincing me to do the jobs he requested with less resistance. But his half-truths were whole lies. A claim he made of someone's guilt was built on fractions of information and a reliance on a naiveté he was mistaken in believing I had.

If Alistair wants to keep his secrets, that's fine. But he'll soon find that I won't tolerate anything that cages me a third time.

Furious, I stand and move quickly to the nearest window. I hear Alistair follow, but before he can stop me, I yank at the nailed down drapes. It takes all my strength, but I pull the top corner free and the fabric folds down, leaving half the window exposed as sunlight streams into the library.

Alistair, who'd been only a few feet behind me, stops just shy of the late morning sunlight.

We stand there, fuming at each other, a wide beam of light marking the gap between us. His nostrils flare and I know that he wishes his gaze could turn me to ash right now. But his hesitance to cross the space between us has me wondering if the sun can do just that to him.

"Something to know about me," I hiss, "I'm not so good at trust. Which means that I don't like secrets, and I certainly don't like being told what I can't do."

“You don’t like secrets?” he laughs, but his look is scornful. “You *are* a secret, Stella. Everything about you is secretive. But I’m a man with my own demons, so I don’t ask. I would think you could give me the same courtesy.”

“Why don’t you want me to look around outside?” I ask, uninterested in hearing his excuses. Maybe he’s right. Maybe I am overreacting to his evasions about the sun. But I don’t think so. It’s one thing for him to be cagey about searching outside, but the fact that he wants to keep *me* from doing it is concerning.

Alistair’s face screws up in a blend of frustration and stubbornness. “Why can’t you just listen to me? Does everything have to be so difficult with you?”

“Answer the question.”

“This is *my* home, not yours. You don’t make the rules.”

“Neither do you,” I scoff. “You’re a slave to a curse, and apparently the sun.”

“And you’re a slave to your own fear,” he spits back at me, still staying just out of the sun’s range. “I see you stalking the halls, looking for a way out or a reason to run. Your distrust is going to leave you stranded, Little Wolf. Haven’t you ever heard that lone wolves die alone?”

I flinch at the words as Orrin’s voice echoes in my head. ‘Remember, Little Wolf, you’re packless. It’s me or death,’ he used to say. And though the brothers are different, they see me the same. A lonely, wounded, vulnerable pup who can be tamed with a leash and some negative reinforcement.

*They’re wrong.*

“You’re right, I am a lone wolf,” I shrug, refusing the sudden urge to cry. “But did it ever occur to you that living packless has given me an edge that you don’t have? You’re doted on, Alistair. Your staff voluntarily cursed themselves for your benefit and they defend you when you don’t deserve it. You know nothing of desperation.” I shake my head in disgust, disappointed that selfishness seems to be a family trait. “So judge me for my distrust all you want, but it’s kept me alive. Meanwhile, you’re still here because others have fallen on the sword for you, their bodies creating the hill you stand on.”

“So I can’t make assumptions about you, but you can make them about me?” he demands, the anger in his green eyes so deep that it must have roots growing down to his toes. “Tell me, did it ever occur to you that I might have reasons for the secrets I keep and the demands that I make?”

“No. Because you don’t bother to explain them. You just tell me what to do. What did you think I’d say to that?”

He blinks, taken aback. For a moment, I think he’ll apologize and explain why he’s insisting no one search the grounds. But then his sneer falls back into place.

“I don’t owe you an explanation. I don’t owe you anything.”

When he says nothing more, I step backward, the sunlight a cavern between us that I know he won’t cross. “Then I guess I don’t owe you my help.”

I make for the door, but his growl follows me out into the hall. “Go ahead. Run, Little Wolf. We both know you didn’t need a reason anyway.”

# Chapter 13

## Stella

if i didn't know better,
i'd think you were talking to me now

The sun bathes my face in warmth, robins chirp in the oak trees and a butterfly flutters past my face, but all I feel is irritation.

*Why can't the man just use his words and* tell me *what's going on?* Based on Alistair's behavior, one would think that I'd demanded he give me every coin he owns rather than the simple explanation I asked for.

"I may have been a bit aggressive," I admit to myself, picking threads of grass and sprinkling them over my boots. "But he is being difficult."

"Stella?" I glance over my shoulder and see Milly coming my way with a basket hanging from her arm. The sun reflects off the blonde in her hair, and the way the light hits her face makes me wonder if she's not a little younger than I first assumed.

"Did he send you to tell me to stop pouting?" I say, knowing it's unfair to take my annoyance out on her. It's Alistair's fault. I should take it out on him.

"No." She folds herself down onto the grass beside me, setting the basket between her crisscrossed legs. "When he came rampaging into the kitchen

and I asked why he was upset, he said ‘Stella is by far the most annoying one yet.’ Then he told me to let him know when you were ready to grovel.”

I roll my eyes. I shouldn’t be surprised by the audacity of him. But rare is the man that carries as much unearned confidence as Alistair.

“What did he do this time?” Milly asks.

“He’s just so insufferable. He can’t answer a question, he has to evade it. He can’t share an idea, he has to hint at it. Everything is so difficult with him.”

Milly nods quietly, turning to face the line of trees along the tall stone fence. There’s a thoughtfulness to the silence that surrounds us, both of us lost in our own heads. It might be the most peaceful I’ve felt in years, despite my frustrations with Alistair. There’s a sense of maternal comfort when Milly is around, and I can feel her concern extending not just to Alistair, but to me too.

“You’re a direct person, Stella,” she says, smiling fondly at me. “I imagine part of that is who you are, but part of it is probably due to the things you’ve experienced.”

I don’t answer. We both know my past is messy, it was clear when I showed up here covered in dirt and ready to run. But I’m grateful that Milly doesn’t ask much about it. I don’t have the energy to relive it all right now.

“And Alistair avoids directness?” I ask ruefully.

“You have survived by cutting through the fluff. Alistair has survived by shrouding himself in fluff. You’re two sides of the same coin, my dear.”

I don’t argue with her. What would be the point? She’s not wrong.

“So then how do you suggest I deal with her highness in there?” I sass, nodding my head back toward the manor where I’m sure Alistair is

stewing, plotting ways to get back at me for questioning his authority.

Milly's responding smile is mischievous. "I thought this might give you some ideas."

She hands me the basket. I pull back the cloth on the top and find an assortment of different colored paints and paintbrushes along with a wooden pallet.

Memories flood my mind. Happy mornings in the meadow with Mother, her planting new flowers she bought from a traveling salesman and me painting the blooms perched beneath her nose every time she stopped to smell them.

But then there are also the dark nights, Paul's feet creaking on the floorboards and his drunken voice shouting through the walls as my every brushstroke on the canvas was a desperate attempt to paint the peace I yearned for or the vengeance I knew I shouldn't reach for.

"What do you want me to do with them?" I ask, hesitant to admit that my mind is already conjuring pictures to paint. Even the duke doesn't know of my propensity for art. I've made a point not to tell him.

Why give the man another pressure point to push on?

"Play a prank," Milly shrugs. "Paint the seat of his chair so it sticks to his pants when he stands. Or use it to release your feelings; splatter it on a wall. Do whatever you want with it. I just hope it helps."

I consider her ideas, an unconventional one beginning to form in my mind. "How are you so good at giving advice?"

Milly's smile is sad, and she looks up at the sun shining through puffy white clouds. "I'm a mother. It's my job to give advice."

"But you chose to stay with Alistair?" I ask hesitantly. I have no right to ask her personal questions, knowing that I'm keeping secrets of my own.

But Mildred makes me feel at ease, and that's a rare occurrence.

"My kids are grown and independent. They didn't need me much anymore, but Alistair did. When he was first cursed, no one else was willing to stay here with him, so I did. The other staff followed suit, but I don't think any of them would have done it without me. They're under the false impression that I actually have control over that boy." She laughs and shakes her head.

"You kind of do. He's on much better behavior when you're around."

"He's a good boy, he just has a bad habit of handling fear with anger."

I snort. "You can say that again."

Milly pats my hand. "His time here at the manor hasn't been quite as simple as you might think. Things have happened that make us all a little wary, but him especially. He just hides it with sarcasm and a smile. But give him time. He'll come around."

Then she stands and goes back to the manor, leaving me with the basket of paints. But the longer I sit there, the more my fingers itch to hold a brush. There's no canvas in the basket, but Milly did say I was welcome to splatter paint on a wall…

Hopping to my feet, I return to the manor and walk the corridors, looking for the right spot. I stop outside of an unused parlor, the wide hallway clean but rarely used. There's a wide gap between windows and I already see in my mind the way I want the paint to spread across the stone.

My body moves of its own accord, remembering the steps as I place a blank canvas of white paint across the stone wall, prepping the surface. Then I use a piece of charcoal to sketch out my idea, and mix my colors on the wooden pallet.

Then I paint.

First comes powder blue, blending with vaporous clouds, a golden sun off to the side. I have to stand on an end table as I delicately layer gold and orange over my sky, turning everything warm like honey. A cottage comes next, white and brown with pops of green and pink.

Mother loved flowers, so I put lots of them around the base of the cottage and coming out of the window boxes. More than she ever had time to care for.

But I know she would love to see our home like this. Surrounded by a clearing, wildflowers blooming and forests and mountains far off in the distance.

I've finished the sky and barely begun painting the cottage by the time I feel the pull for dinner, the meadow only a simple charcoal outline on my white stone canvas. But seeing it, even unfinished, brings a small feeling of peace that I didn't know I'd been missing.

'Haven't you ever heard that lone wolves die alone?' Alistair's words repeat in my head, but as I stare at the mural that's slowly taking life, I know he's wrong. If I die today, Milly will be sad. She may not miss me constantly, but she *would* miss me. Even Alistair would be haunted by it.

My fingers brush across the sketched-out flowers, remembering how much Mother loved the tulips. *If I didn't know better, I'd think you were talking to me now*. It's like she's here in the hall, and I smile, knowing that if I died tonight, I would be welcomed into my mother's arms. And even though I have no desire to give up just yet, it gives me comfort to know that in death, I won't be alone.

# Chapter 14

## Alistair

### i say i don't want that, but what if i Do?

Stella says nothing three days later as we perform tests on the useless gold ball we found in the cabinet of an upstairs parlor. She's been quiet since our spat in the library, acting cordial as we work on our search. She's been nothing but polite.

*I don't like it.*

It's unnatural for Stella to be quiet and easy-going. Her bite is as big as her bark, but right now all she does is nod, ask the occasional question, and avoid my gaze.

I know I pushed her too far the other day with my demands that she not search the grounds. But I couldn't exactly tell her *why* I didn't want her searching the grounds.

I didn't worry when she was searching for an exit, but if she went out looking for an artifact, she would find something much more dangerous. A weakness.

"So far, contact with skin causes no transformations or time travel of any kind," she says, scribbling notes on a piece of parchment. Her hair is tied

back in a messy knot, but half of it has fallen out and tumbles over her shoulder. She has to try three times to get it all to stay behind her ear.

"Well, since it's a child's toy, perhaps I should play with it to trigger a reaction," I suggest, baiting her.

But she doesn't even look at me. "Sure, why not?"

"Crocodile, come on," I whine. "Stop being so agreeable."

"Why?" she asks, still writing her notes.

Annoyed—with her or myself, I'm not sure—I snatch the quill from her fingers. She glares at me and tries to take it back, but I hold it just out of reach. I can see the fire start to burn in her eyes, and even Narcissus hisses at me from his spot on the table.

"Can you for once act your own age?" Stella demands, still trying to take the quill.

"Not without positive reinforcement," I smirk.

She scowls and turns for the door, but I grab her wrist before she can get far.

"Howler, can you just forgive me already so we can go back to normal? I don't like this nice, yet not friendly act that you have going."

"It's called indifference," she says condescendingly, pulling her arm back.

I let her, glad that she's at least talking to me with feeling now. "Well can you stop being indifferent, please?"

She sighs and her look of exhaustion is not flattering on her already strange face. But I don't say that. *See, I'm making progress*. "Alistair, what do you want from me? You acted like a child and then commanded me without any explanation as to why."

“I know.” I push my hair back, annoyed with Stella for making this difficult, annoyed with myself for caring what she thinks, and annoyed with the curse for putting us together at all.

But mostly I’m annoyed because the past few days have felt so *lonely* without her jabs and snarky retorts. I don’t like how dependent I feel with her, but I also don’t like *not* talking to her.

“There are things that you don’t know,” I explain stiltedly. “Things I…”

“You have secrets,” she shrugs, unfazed. “So do I. I don’t need to know everything about you, Alistair. But I do need to know the things that affect me, and at the very least, I deserve an explanation when you tell me what to do.”

“Yeah, you really don’t like being told what to do.”

Stella rolls her eyes and lunges forward, grabbing the quill. “Newsflash, Al, no one does.”

She goes back to her notes, then rolls the gold ball in her hand, studying it. I watch her for a minute, wishing I was angrier. She’s being difficult, and yet I find myself wanting to apologize just to stop her from being upset with me.

I gather that this is the wrong motivation for an apology, but honestly I’m just shocked that I feel the desire to apologize at all. *What is happening to me?*

“Look, can we…” I close my eyes, hating myself for being so emotional. “Are we okay now? Or do I need to say something else?”

“You have no idea how relationships work, do you?”

I open my eyes at her humored tone and find her looking at me with a pitying sort of entertainment. “It’s been a while since I’ve practiced much.”

Instead of giving me a cutting remark and pointing out all the ways I've communicated poorly with her, Stella sighs and holds out her hand.

"Me neither," she says. "So from one outcast to another, we'll call it good."

I'm so in awe of her graciousness that I grin and wink to hide the emotion as I shake her hand. Because I'm emotionally stunted and feelings are weird.

"To be clear, I have only ever been an outcast by choice," I tease, shaking off the heaviness brought on by her forgiveness.

She rolls her eyes and hands me the golden ball. "Shut up and help me test this. Maybe we need to try talking to it?" she hums, tapping the feather of her quill on her chin. "Tell it what you want to transform into."

"I want to transform into a dog," I say absently. "Do you have a particular aversion to the nickname 'Little Wolf'?"

"What?" Stella says, crinkling her nose. She actually looks better that way.

"The other day, when I called you that, you seemed especially upset about it. Why?"

Her green eyes flash to mine and I see the walls going up. Stella was right when she said that she has secrets of her own. I'm not afraid of her secrets, but my curiosity does want to be satiated.

"Because I don't like it," she says, her tone leaving no room for argument.

"Okay then, Tiger," I say, studying her, "Then tell me something that you are willing to share."

She glares at me and motions to the gold ball.

“Stupid golden ball,” I croon to the ridiculous toy, “Please turn me into a dog. *Now* will you tell me something about yourself? Something honest?”

Stella scribbles her notes and I wait, exercising my patience. It’s a skill I’m really quite good at but rarely feel the need to utilize. Especially here at the manor where image and reputation mean so little. And heaven knows the only reason I use virtuous things like patience is to gain something.

“My mom loved flowers,” Stella finally says, and her voice is so quiet that I almost don’t hear it.

“What kind?” I ask, not wanting her to stop there.

“Anything that bloomed. She didn’t care what color it was, how hard it was to grow, or whether she had to replant it every year. She just wanted to surround us in things that bloomed.”

Her expression is so affectionate as she speaks that I almost feel like I’m talking to a different person. There’s a softness to her face that I’ve never seen before. And for some reason, I find myself wanting to see it again.

“What was it that she loved so much about the blooms?”

Stella turns a skeptical eye on me. “Why do you care?”

I sigh, sitting in my usual chair and depositing the golden ball in front of Narcissus. He bats at it until Stella takes it away, scowling at me. Then he meows in protest and I stroke his back.

“I don’t know,” I admit.

She’s quiet at first, but then she nods decisively. “She liked life. Seeing things that represented the gift of it made her happy. Blooming flowers, newborns, sunrises. Anything that marked a beginning.”

“That’s…profound,” I say, surprised to mean it. I can’t think of anything that I enjoy for such a wholesome reason. In my world, everything good

exists to be consumed. Beauty, food, money. I've never enjoyed something that I couldn't use. Never thought of it.

"It is, I guess," she smiles, and I'm once again shocked by the shift in her appearance.

I settle in my chair and a shaft of sunlight blinks across my face, a reflection from the tall mirror that leans against the wall. I flinch out of instinct, even though I know the reflection is harmless. Even if it weren't, the effects never last long.

It's the one good thing about this aspect of the curse. I rub a finger along the cut on my neck that's now completely healed, only a faded scar marking the spot. Even that will be gone by tomorrow. *The curse's one generosity, I suppose.*

"Do you need me to close them?" The kindness in Stella's tone shocks me and I stare at her, confused. "Do you want me to close the drapes?" she asks again, eyeing me with concern.

I shake my head dumbly, confused by her concern and gentility. "No," I manage to blurt. "I don't mind reflections of the sun."

She nods but says nothing. She doesn't hound me for answers or taunt me for my strange aversion. It's a decency that I didn't expect and don't deserve. I know that without a doubt.

But she doesn't.

She doesn't know about the time I did nothing to stop Orrin from exiling the father of a woman he wished to court, only to later toss her aside. She doesn't know about the time Orrin cornered a kitten and set it on fire while I watched and did nothing. The kitten survived and I later stole it from Orrin and gave it to the baker's daughter, but it didn't matter. I still let it happen.

There are so many ugly things Stella doesn't know about me. And for some reason, I want to keep it that way.

"So, what is your blossoming flower?" I ask after I've found my voice again.

"My what?" Stella stares at me incredulously.

I feel my face grow hot, and it takes me a second to realize that I'm blushing. *I haven't blushed since I was a child.* I don't get embarrassed. Ever.

"Your mother liked blooming flowers and sunrises because it represented new beginnings," I explain, picking up a book and pretending to read so she can't see the mortifying shade of pink on my cheeks. "What is it that brings you that kind of joy?"

"Geese."

I whip my head up to face her. "I'm sorry, did you say geese?"

She shrugs. She's still wearing the same clothes she's been in since she first arrived, but I notice that the shirt beneath her bodice is a different color today. I wonder who convinced her to wear it and quickly decide on Milly.

I nearly blurt out a compliment but catch myself just in time. Stella is still unattractive, but she looks nicer today. Wild, but softer. *Maybe she's finally bathed*.

"I like geese," she says unapologetically, sorting through her notes.

"Is it the loud squawking or their propensity to use their beaks as weapons that won you over?"

"I don't want to pet them. I just like to watch them."

"Because…"

A self-conscious look flits across her face and I find myself a tiny bit pleased to know that she cares what I think. Even if it's only a little.

"I like to see them fly," she explains, looking down. I want to nudge her chin up so I can see the emotion in her green eyes. They give so much away, it's fun to watch. "When I watch them moving in a near perfect V, it makes me feel like everything will be okay. Because if birds like that can find their way, then so can I."

All at once I feel my hands ache to reach for her. I hate vulnerability. It makes me shudder. But even as I think it, I'm not so sure. *I say I don't want that, but what if I do?* What if I want to share too? To connect?

But then my chest tightens, and I feel the urge to shield myself. Back up, close off, thrust up a wall as fast as I can stack the insults.

"I guess an animal such as yourself would find geese comforting," I sneer, shaking my head.

I want to hit myself.

Why do I do this? Ruin good things with sarcasm and indifference. It's getting old to always have the upper hand if the upper hand is all you have. Getting old to pull long cons that never result in a big enough payout.

I won't stop though. I don't know how.

But when Stella just rolls her eyes and lightly smacks my shoulder, calling me 'heartless rogue', I wonder if maybe, possibly, I can leave my mask, my games and my upper hand for another time. Maybe just this once, I can have something as simple as a…friend.

# Chapter 15

## Alistair

### chaNge the prophecy

"Alistair," Mildred greets me, standing at the kitchen counter, a stack of dishes in front of her. "What brings you to the kitchen at this hour?"

It's nearly midnight. Mildred, Brutus, and the three older women—Tilda, Denise and Franchesca—are cleaning up, preparing for tomorrow. They all give me thoughtful looks but say nothing as I take my usual seat at the long table in front of the fireplace.

They're used to my nightly appearances in the kitchen, though I don't usually come here quite so late.

"The usual," I sigh, splaying my fingers across the table. I haven't slept well since before the curse, and I've slept even worse in the last two years. Since Leeta. And now that Stella is here bringing up unwanted feelings, I hardly sleep at all.

"What was it this time?" Milly asks, sliding a cookie on a plate and a glass of milk my way. All of the older staff members have heard my

stories to some extent, but only Milly has the nerve to ask me personal questions.

Franchesca, Denise and Tilda join her as she sits on the other side of the table, all of them watching me with expectant looks. But it's not their brazen curiosity that bothers me. It's the empathy that they're already preparing to dole out.

Empathy I don't deserve.

"It was nothing," I lie, pushing at the cookie but not eating it. I hate the way the lot of them look at me. Like deep down underneath the selfishness and insults, I'm worth saving. *I'm not.* And they would know that if they knew me half as well as they think they do.

But I don't let them. It's easier that way.

"Let's try it this way then," Milly says, her knowing gaze pinning me in place. "What's on your mind?"

"Myself," I admit quietly.

Brutus laughs, standing by the stove, and I glare at his bald head. "Pardon me, master," he says, not sounding apologetic *at all*, "But that doesn't sound like new information."

He's always been more honest than the rest of the staff, and quite frankly I was confused when he decided to stay and bear the curse with me. The man has never liked me, and I can't blame him.

"Am I a bad person?" I ask, directing my question at the cook. Milly and the other women are kind, but almost to a fault. Milly especially sees more in me than there is. But Brutus will be honest regardless of my feelings.

The cook groans and wipes his hands off on a towel. He takes his sweet time answering and I finally dig into my cookie, trying to distract myself.

“You’re not a *good* person,” Brutus says, his expression slightly sympathetic now. “But you’re also not a bad person.”

“So, I’m what—a medium person?”

“Yeah,” he nods. “You wouldn’t kill anyone unless you had to and I don’t believe that you would put any of us in mortal danger on purpose.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “But?”

He lumbers over to the table, sitting at an empty seat. The women watch him with warning looks, but he ignores them.

“But I don’t know that you would risk your skin for someone else,” he says matter-of-factly. “Especially if that sacrifice didn’t come with a reward.”

“And you would risk your skin for me even if you got nothing out of it?” I ask. I’m not angry with his words, but they do bring an uncomfortable pinch in my chest. One that I’ve never felt before. *Is that guilt?*

“I would risk my life for Franchesca’s or Milly’s or Tilda’s,” he shrugs. “And…yes. If I saw an arrow heading for you, I would push you out of the way.”

I stare at him, certain that he’s lost his mind. “But *why?* You have a child. Surely, she’s more important than my self-absorbed carcass.”

“Aye, she is. But she won’t be leading us. You will.”

I turn my eyes back to my plate as I recall the nightmare that woke me. I was walking the halls of the manor in the dark, a single light up ahead. The hallway became narrower and narrower as I went, and at the end a mirror hung on the wall.

Only it wasn’t me in the glass. At least, not one that I recognized.

My reflection was perfect, hair styled, shirt pressed and not a thing out of place. There was almost a porcelain look to my skin, and a sick, greedy

smile on my face. Sharp canine teeth peeked out over my bottom lip and blood dripped down my chin.

But it wasn't the blood or the teeth that disturbed me so much. It was the look in my eyes. Like I was starving. Like I had torn through the necks of every person in the village just to make my skin shine, but it wasn't enough. Completely insatiable.

*Is that who I am? Is that the man these people are putting their faith in?*

"I'm not worth that kind of faith," I growl, breaking the cookie into pieces.

"Maybe not, but the people of Roburry are," Brutus argues, his tone somehow tough and forgiving all at once. "And they need you more than my Kaitlyn needs me. You aren't a great person—"

"Brutus, really," Franchesca complains, her red hair bobbing as she turns to glare at him.

"It's true Franny," Brutus shrugs. "You are not a great person, Master. Not *yet*. Your brother, on the other hand…I'm not sure he's capable of goodness."

I don't waste my breath pretending to defend Orrin. He doesn't deserve it. There was a time that he did. A time when he was aggressive and quick to anger, but also quick to ask for forgiveness and easy to make laugh. *But that Orrin is gone*. I haven't seen him since we were young teenagers, and I've lost faith that I will ever meet him again.

"You're probably right about Orrin," I say tonelessly, pushing the plate away. "But you're wrong about me."

And then, like a coward, I leave the kitchen, mindlessly wandering the dim hallways until I can no longer hear them discussing my exit. I've

heard it all before. They think I need motivation to change. That if I could just see things clearly, I could be different.

But they don't understand. I don't *want* to be different.

My feet pause as I come to my own portrait hanging on the wall. My brother sent it to me shortly after the curse began. And although I knew it was meant to be a cruel reminder of what could have been, I hung it anyway. To remind myself of what I was trying to get back to.

The picture before me is of a man who knows who he is. Who isn't tied down by the opinions and approval of others. He doesn't need anyone to tell him that he's good. In fact, he prefers if they hate him to begin with.

*No expectations, no disappointment.*

The man in the frame isn't happy per se, but he's…

My brows furrow. I can't quite remember the positives of my past life. I had money, social status, women. I was the black sheep of the family for certain, but that didn't stop me from finding the success and comfort that I craved. Life was lonely at times, but it was good.

At least I used to think it was.

But when I look back on it now, I just see a boy on the run. Running from consequences, running from connection, running from responsibility. *Desperate to change the prophecy of loneliness and guilt that I crafted and fulfilled for myself.*

And for what? For women like Carissa? Women who only wanted me because I was the man their fathers told them to stay away from. But I can't resent them for it. I used them the same way they used me, and then we mutually tossed each other aside, having gotten what we wanted.

"But why do I suddenly care about the lack of fulfillment in my past life?" I whisper to myself, staring at the portrait. The man in the frame

never cared and I don’t want to either.

But I’m starting to think that a desire for revenge isn’t going to be enough anymore. Because when I break this curse—and I will—revenge won’t last me the lifetime I’ll have waiting for me. So what do I want to fill those years with?

*Just someone who wants my company.*

I recoil at the thought. *That can’t be right.*

People are fickle. If someone wants my company, it’s for a reason. *What a stupid thing to wish for.*

Frustrated with myself and my stupid, frail human soul, I turn and stomp down the hall. I’ve almost reached the library, ready to lecture Narcissus about how emotionally detached I am—hoping I might believe it—when I feel a knife pressed against my side.

# Chapter 16

## Stella

### the best wAy out is through

**Nine months ago…**

*"Can I get you anything else, sweetheart?"*

*I smile at the waitress and shake my head. She watches me, the concern clear on her plump face. At an inn like this, she's probably seen her fair share of people running from ghosts and monsters. But she hasn't seen a ghost like mine. Even if she wanted to help me, she couldn't.*

*But he might.*

*When she finally moves on to the next table, I slump lower in my seat, the fire cackling close by, casting a warm glow on the room. It's busy tonight—which is good. The bigger and louder the crowd, the easier it is for me to get lost in it. And the more likely this plan will work.*

*"Stephanie?" a deep voice says.*

*I look up and find a man standing by the table. He's taller than most of the men in the room, a little lither than I was expecting. There's a severe look to him, his face weather worn and his eyes haunted like mine.*

*"The Baron?" I ask, my fingers grasped around my knife under the table.*

*He nods and sits beside me, close enough that no one can hear us without invading our space. At first glance, I pegged him at forty-two or forty-three, but up close I realize that he can't be older than his early to mid-thirties. His rugged appearance ages him, but it's the steely quality to his expression that made me assume he was older.*

*"You need assistance with a delivery?" he asks.*

*I nod, thankful that he's cautious enough not to speak plainly here.*

*"That's correct. Did…" I hesitate, anxiety making my fingers tremble. "Did she tell you about the…situation?"*

*I feel him study me, but I refuse to meet his gaze, instead playing aloof and watching the fire. If he senses my fear, he might take me for everything I have. Or worse, take me back to Orrin and claim the reward the duke is offering for my return.*

*"She did," he says. "This will be treacherous."*

*"I can handle it. Can you?"*

*When I look to see his reaction, he stares back, determined. "Yes. In fact, I insist on it. If things are truly the way our friend explained them, then the delivery needs to be made as soon as possible."*

*Surprised by his willingness, I spear him with a glare. "Why would you care about delivering quickly? You'll be paid the same regardless."*

*The Baron leans forward, glancing around the crowded room. "Because this is why I started this business. For people like you. The money is just a way to keep the predators away."*

*"And it doesn't hurt to get paid."*

*He smiles, his face softening with the expression. "No, I suppose it doesn't. Are you ready?"*

*"Now?"*

*“It’s best to be quick about it. If we wait too long, people might take notice and alert him.”*

*He’s right. The duke always keeps my disappearances quiet—no one can know that I’m his pet. But he will have incentivized a few bounty hunters to find me and quietly bring me back.*

*Where I will be treated to solitary confinement in the dungeons and another scar on my forearm.*

No, not this time. *This time I’m not going back.*

*I follow the Baron out the back door and into the night. Pulling my cloak tighter, I walk behind him to the stable where a young groom holds a black horse.*

*The horse doesn’t do more than blink at us when we approach, nearly a statue it’s so calm. My nerves ease slightly at its confidence. Slightly.*

*“You first,” the Baron says, motioning me to the saddle. “I don’t want to risk someone trying to snatch you off the back.”*

*I sigh and fish the money out of my pocket as I reach for the saddle. “The payment.”*

*But he shakes his head and shoves the money back at me. “No. This isn’t a job to me. It’s a rescue mission.”*

*“I don’t need rescued.”*

*He considers me before nodding. “A liberation mission then. But regardless, I don’t want your money. Just do as I say and that will be payment enough. I’ve had more than one delivery go awry because someone couldn’t follow orders.”*

*I reluctantly put the money away, not fond of the idea of accepting charity—no matter how much I need it.*

*Once I'm up in the saddle, the Baron swings up behind me and takes the reins, tossing a gold coin at the stable boy. We've barely turned toward the forest when someone shouts at us.*

*When I turn, I see a guard dressed in black.* The duke's men.

*"He found me."*

*"Let's go," the baron shouts to his horse, kicking him into a gallop.*

*The Baron's horse is fast. But the duke's men are faster.*

*They catch up to us quickly, reaching out to try and pull me from the saddle. But the Baron was smart to put me in front, his arms caging me in and making me impossible to reach.*

*We're out of the village, almost to the tree line when I hear the Baron cry out. Turning around, I see the shaft of an arrow sticking out of his shoulder. My stomach drops, it's my fault.*

*"Keep running," I say, bracing myself.*

*"What?" the Baron grunts.*

*"No matter what, I need you to keep running. Don't stop."*

*"Stephanie—"*

*"It's Stella. And I'm not the only one out there that needs liberated."*

*There's a pause as he understands what I'm saying. "Don't you dare!"*

*I glance at the Duke's riders. There are four of them, two armed with crossbows. The Baron won't make it out of this alive. Not with me. "Don't come back for me. I'm not worth it."*

*And then I punch his wounded shoulder. He cries out and drops his arm, and I take the opening, launching myself from the saddle.*

*I hit the ground hard, rolling to soften the blow, but I know I'll have bruises down the side of my body tomorrow.*

*The duke's horses slow, dancing in a circle around me. Off in the distance, I can see the Baron stop at the tree line and look back, but he knows just as well as I do that he can't help me now.*

*He watches as one of the riders dismounts and walks slowly up to me.* Orrin. *My muscles clench as I realize that the duke is here. He's never come after me himself before.*

*It's not a good sign that he did.*

*He lifts his helmet and squats in front of me, his lifeless eyes watching me like a cat watches a wounded bird. Hungry and waiting for the right moment to pounce.*

*"You stupid Little Wolf," Orrin tsks, shaking his head. "I thought I taught you better than this."*

*Despite my initial desire to spit in his face, tell him he doesn't own me, and maybe stab him in the groin, I say nothing, feigning submission. I've been a captive animal long enough to know that only dead wolves strike fast. A wise wolf bides their time and waits for the right opening to make the kill.*

*And someday, I will.*

*When his fingers grasp my chin, I force myself not to react, pushing all the hate out of my eyes. It would only fuel him.*

*"You will never do that again," he hisses, and I can't hold back the whimper when his fingers squeeze too hard.*

*"Yes, sir."*

*"You know what comes next," he says, his other hand grasping my arm. Fear writhes in my gut and memories of past pain cause me to resist just a little.*

*But he's stronger and he lifts my wrist, taking his hand from my chin to push my sleeve down, exposing my forearm.*

*I watch as he takes the knife from his belt, unable to keep myself from trembling slightly. Over the years, I've prided myself on learning to contain my emotions so I can't be punished for them. But fear is different.*

*I can't seem to smother it.*

*"Your shaking will only make it worse," Orrin says icily, poising the knife below the six scars running along the underside of my forearm.*

*I will myself to be still, and just when I've managed to stop the trembling, the knife slides across my skin.*

*The duke's pressure is harder than necessary—it always is—tearing past the first layer of skin. I push my lips together to keep from screaming as the blade rips through my nerves and blood pours out across my skin. The burning is strong and I ache to cry, but I wait, the duke still holding my wrist.*

*"Do I need to reinforce to you that escape is not an option?" he asks, looming over me, his expression hard.*

*I shake my head, my vision swimming a little. "No."*

*He narrows his eyes at me, and after a moment he yanks me to my feet. A loud whimper escapes my lips at the pull on my arm and I feel the tears burn my eyes. When I look at the duke, he's nodding, satisfied that I've learned my lesson.*

*Even when he releases my arm, I wait until he turns away to cradle it close. One of the guards dismounts, allowing me to pull myself up on the saddle before he sits behind me. While he resituates his reins, I watch the duke grimace at the blood on his gloved fingers. A vindictive pleasure blooms in my chest.*

*It's these small, almost insignificant moments of victory that give me the strength to keep going. To endure injuries and ridicule. It's not much, but it's one thing he can't own, can't take.*

*When we turn back for town, I search the tree line, hoping the Baron took my advice and ran.*

*But he's still there.*

*I wave my hand to the side, urging him to go, but instead, he lifts a hand to his brow and salutes me. Then he turns and disappears into the trees.*

*"Cheer up, Little Wolf," the duke calls out, too happy for comfort. "You're an employee of the duke. Remember, being useful means being alive, Stella."*

*I say nothing, knowing it's what he expects. But he's wrong. I'm not alive. I'm just breathing.*

When I wake, the room is filled with the glow of the fire that I left burning in the hearth. I couldn't bring myself to sleep in the dark again, knowing that when I inevitably woke in the night, I would recover easier if I could see my surroundings.

I'm quick to rise, not willing to risk another nightmare by trying to sleep again. As I slip on the robe and slippers that Francesca insisted I wear, I think about the Baron.

I haven't seen him up close since that day in Fernshire. But I've seen him from a distance, and I've heard about the people he's freed from the duke's control.

He's been more active since he tried to rescue me, and it gives me a small amount of comfort to think that I had something to do with it.

It does not, however, give me comfort to think of what the duke has done since then. I rub the seventh scar on my forearm, remembering with brutal

clarity the determination he employed when he brought me back to the castle. That was nine months ago, and he's sent me on almost as many missions.

*He's getting greedier.* It's only a matter of time before he makes his move on the capital. But I won't help him take it. With any luck, I'll be long gone before then.

If Alistair and I can find a way around the curse. Because I'm pretty sure it won't take Orrin three months to find me—

My thoughts and body freeze as I see the shadow of a man ambling down the hall ahead of me. With my adrenaline still high, I move toward him, fast and silent.

My knife is pulled free of its hiding place and pressed to his side before he can even speak.

"What the—"

"Stay back," I snarl, the scar on my wrist stinging, a phantom pain that's accompanied by memory upon memory of moments just like this.

Me alone on some godforsaken mission for the duke, caught in a dark hall or sneaking across the lawn, a blade pressed to my back, or an arrow pointed at my heart.

There's a pause of silence, and then, "Stella?"

My hand falters. "Alistair?"

He shifts, maneuvering the knife out of my fingers with surprising skill. A moment later, a sconce comes to life along the wall, and I see him pocket a set of matches. He's dressed in pajamas, his hair a tangled mess and deep shadows under his eyes.

"You look terrible," I comment.

“Well hello to you too,” he says with a dry smile, handing me the knife. “I wouldn’t go insulting me when you look like someone who’s been awoken from the dead.”

I touch my hair and cringe at the sheer height of it. My curls are a frizzy mess and I’m sure my face is nearly skeletal from my lack of sleep.

He’s right, I probably do look like a corpse.

“What are you doing up so late?” I ask, stowing my knife.

“Apparently I’m being assassinated,” he retorts, opening the doors to the library and motioning me in ahead of him. Inside, he lights another sconce and I make for one of the sofas where I find Narcissus curled up on one end.

“He doesn’t sleep with you?” I ask as I settle myself down, the cat stretching before he crawls over to my lap.

“Absolutely not,” Alistair scoffs, setting to work lighting the fire. “Narcissus doesn’t do anything that could potentially make people doubt his role as master of the manor. Which includes sharing my bed.”

“You’re a very independent man, aren’t you?” I croon as I scratch the cat’s chin. He purrs, kneading his paws against my thighs.

“Lucky cat,” Alistair murmurs, watching us. But I must have misheard him.

Once the flames have caught on the hearth, Alistair opts to sit on the floor, leaning back against an armchair. It puts me off guard to see him so relaxed, his legs stretched out in front of him and his clothes rumpled.

“Why are you up?” I ask, stroking Narcissus as he falls back asleep.

Alistair turns his striking green eyes on me. “You first,” he challenges, his dimples flashing.

“Bad dream,” I admit.

“Must be going around.”

“You too?”

He nods, not expanding on the information. Feeling equally protective of my own nightmare, I don’t push him. Instead, I watch the way the firelight dances across his face. I don’t usually allow myself to openly admire him. It would only boost his ego.

But he seems more human tonight. Like the show is over and he’s removed his costume. It makes me wonder who he is when no one’s looking.

“Why can’t you walk in sunlight?” I ask, suddenly uncomfortable with all the secrets filling up the space between us.

He sighs like he knew the question was coming and shifts to face me. “It’s the curse. I can leave the property of the manor, but sunlight burns and cuts me. So I can’t get far. The wounds heal quickly, but the pain isn’t worth it.”

Empathy purrs to life inside me and I try to imagine what it would feel like to go four years without feeling the sun. Four years of darkness.

If I were in his position, left to rot in a manor by my brother, isolated from the social influence I once knew, and never allowed to see sunlight, I wouldn’t be a very agreeable person either.

“So why were you so insistent that I shouldn’t search the grounds for the artifact?” I ask, sensing that a piece of the puzzle is still missing. “I understand why you couldn’t do it, but why couldn’t I?”

I’ve seen Alistair annoyed, angry, entertained, confused, curious, but the look of regret that crosses his face is unexpected. “Because of Leeta.”

“…Leeta?” I say tentatively, thrown off by his sudden somber attitude.

“It was two years ago. She was one of the women who spent time here under the curse,” he explains, still facing the fire. “She was angry to be stuck here, which wasn’t shocking. Some women have seen their time here as an opportunity to land a rich husband—me. Others simply bide their time until they can leave. But there have been a few that responded to the curse’s limitations with violence.”

I listen silently, stroking Narcissus’ back more to comfort myself than him. But he purrs regardless, unaware of Alistair’s current state.

“Leeta was one of the violent ones,” Alistair says, and I detect a thread of hatred in his voice. “Her parents were dead and she had four younger brothers that she was the sole provider for. She resented being stuck here, desperate to get back to her family. Apparently, her father had owed money to someone and she was making payments to alleviate the debt. But without her contribution, her family’s home would be taken as payment.

“She tried for weeks to get around the curse, and one night, her worry for her family hit a breaking point.” Alistair pauses, looking down at his hands. “She broke into my room and tried to kill me. We struggled and… her knife ended up in her chest. She died because a physician couldn’t gain access to the grounds and Leeta couldn’t leave. We did what we could, but she didn’t make it to the next morning.”

And then I realize that the loathing that seethes out of him isn’t directed at Leeta. It's directed at himself.

In fact, the more I think on it, the more I understand that Alistair is teeming with self-hatred. It’s in his sarcasm, in his falsely arrogant attitude. It’s even in the way he moves.

Alistair Godfrey despises himself more than anyone else could ever do. And that is why he’s so insufferable.

“That's why Denise looked so horrified when I joked about you killing the women," I guess, so many things beginning to make sense. He nods. "And why you didn't want me to go hunting for the artifact outside. Leeta is buried on the grounds,” I surmise, understanding now why he acted like such a bear.

“You already hate me,” he shrugs, his smirk half-hearted and empty. “Why give you more ammunition?”

I nod, feeling a strange sense of kinship with him. That can be the only reason that I possibly form my next words. “If it makes you feel any better, you’re not the only killer in the room.”

Alistair turns toward me, his face slack with shock. I see him trying to puzzle out who I might have killed and why, but I give him nothing, keeping my expression impassive.

“Do you regret it?” he asks, and I’m surprised he didn’t ask for details.

I think back on my past, recalling the panic and the anger. “No. I feel guilty, killing doesn’t sit well with me. But I don’t regret that they’re dead.”

He nods thoughtfully, a sad smile on his face. “I guess that’s where our similarities end, Freckles. Sounds like you killed someone we’re all better off without. I left a bunch of kids homeless and made a girl go crazy enough to try and kill me. But do you want to know a secret?”

I don’t answer, positive that I don’t like where this is going.

“I wish she’d been successful,” he whispers, and at first, I think I misunderstood him. But when his expression hardens, I know I didn’t.

My heart aches at his words, knowing how much they weigh. I’ve never considered giving up, never allowed myself to think of ending the fight.

But there have been moments when Paul or the duke would threaten to kill me, and a part of me wanted to dare them to do it. To just let it all be over.

But then they would win. And I've never been able to stomach the idea of them thinking that they broke me.

"Alistair—"

"Don't." His gaze murderous, but it doesn't scare me. I know it's a mask.

"I'm sorry," I say gently. "If I had known why you didn't want me searching the grounds, I wouldn't have pushed so hard. But…for what it's worth, I've been told that the best way out is through—through the pain or grief or whatever. Stifling it with hate won't help you heal."

His forehead wrinkles and he leans further back against the chair, studying me like I'm a mythical creature. I want to fidget under his scrutiny, but I sit still out of habit.

"Do you follow that advice?" he asks.

I look down, uncomfortable having the questions turned on me. "Sometimes."

"And does it work when you do it?"

I say nothing, wondering how likely it is that he'll let me leave without making a big deal of my avoidance.

Turns out, there's no chance. "I don't understand you," he says, shaking his head. "Your eyes tell me that you're mind is on the exit, yet you sit there like a perfectly trained pet."

"I'm no one's pet."

"No," he agrees. "You're too wild for that."

I toss a pillow at him. "That's not a compliment."

He catches the pillow and grins.

“On the contrary, it’s a very generous compliment. I’m saying that you are a majestic wolf or a lioness or maybe a rattlesnake, sitting there quietly coiled. It’s impressive to see someone with so much natural strength keeping it in check.”

A smile spreads across my face, but it’s bitter, soured by the memory of constant cages. The smile morphs into a laugh and I rest my head against the back of the couch. Narcissus looks up at me, annoyed by the disturbance, but I can’t stop.

I wipe tears from my eyes and laugh harder when I see the offended look on Alistair’s face.

“You actually think that I have natural strength?” I wheeze through chuckles. “That I’m sitting here instead of running because I have so much natural control?”

“I take it that the answer is no,” he grumbles, put out by my reaction.

“Correct.” The laughter has finally stopped, and I shake my head, in awe of his naïve thoughts. “Alistair, I would think one prisoner would recognize another.”

That gets his attention. Confusion turns to concern, back to confusion, to frustration and then finally rests on curiosity.

“You control yourself because you have to,” he says quietly, finally understanding.

I nod. “It’s a survival tactic, Al. The dog that bites the hand that feeds it never eats again.”

“But the dog who gets away survives,” he guesses, comprehension lighting his eyes. “When I saw you that first day in the forest, you weren't running off to meet your sweetheart or join a traveling troupe. You're on

the run from someone dangerous. That’s why you’ve been so tense since you got here.”

“It’s my eighth escape attempt and it’s not going very well.”

“I wouldn’t say that. Whoever is after you won’t be able to get to you here.”

“True. But this is just another cage. Much less dangerous than my previous one, but still. A cage is a cage, no matter how many accommodations there are inside.”

He moves, leaning his shoulder against the chair so he can face me. “Is that why you keep wearing the same clothes?”

Self-conscious, I toy with the button on my night dress. “Gifts are never just gifts. If you accept, you’re either owned or submitting.”

Alistair sits up straighter, eyes wide with realization. “Those men in the village, they were looking for someone. It was you, wasn’t it? Hell, Slither, what kind of life did we snatch you from?” His voice is so disgusted, his face full of anger and concern. I’m not sure I buy it.

I don’t think I know how.

“One I’m not going back to,” I reply, uncomfortable sitting under the warmth of his worry.

He goes quiet, and his posture relaxes. “There have been eleven girls in this manor over the last four years, and I have never once been happy to have them here. But just this once, I think I’m happy to have a guest.”

“Because you’re hoping that I’ll help you get around the curse.”

He sighs, exasperated. “No, Wolverine. Because I’m hoping that by the time you’re able to leave, you can actually get away from whoever it is you’re running from. No one should be this scared of their own shadow. It's not right.”

I smile, Narcissus purring as I scratch behind his ears. “Why Al, are you actually admitting that you’re worried about me?”

He smirks, the devil incarnate. “Of course I am, Freckles. My life has gotten ten times more exciting since I met you.”

I laugh, finding him ridiculous. But we sit and talk for another hour, trading childhood stories of mischief in front of the fire.

He tells me about the time he and his father surprised his mother for her birthday and scared her so badly that she accidentally lit a curtain on fire.

I, in turn, tell him about the cakes covered in berries that Mother and I used to make for my birthday. We would keep one for ourselves and give the rest to the neighbors. But I always stole one cake and hid it in my room, letting Mother think we were just one short.

Alistair laughs at this story, entertained by my childhood thefts. And by the time we're done sharing—and arguing—the fire has begun to dim and it's well into the night.

We’re on our way through the halls, the library far behind us, when Alistair comes to an abrupt stop. At first, I can’t tell why, but then I see what he’s staring at.

The mural I painted stands before him on the wall, hard to make out in the dark. But as Alistair steps closer, the lantern he carries bathes the painting in bright light.

It’s completed now, the cottage a warm brown and covered in flowers and greenery just the way Mother always wanted it. Sunlight bounces across the scene, shining on two people settled in the tall grass of the meadow.

Their faces are hidden, their backs to us, but it’s clear that the painting depicts a little girl and her mother. They’re leaning close together, their

messy brown hair tumbling down their backs.

It's a happy painting. I wish it were real.

"Is this…" Alistair doesn't look away from the mural as he speaks. "Is this you and your mother?"

"Yes," I reply slowly, unsure what he will think about me putting paint on his walls without asking. "I know that I didn't ask you if it was okay, but Milly told me I could. And you have to admit that this place could use some brightening up—"

"Will you do more?"

I freeze, blinking at him. "What?"

"Do you plan to paint more?" he asks, his expression inscrutable as he continues to stare at the wall.

"Is that a problem?"

He doesn't say anything at first, and I wait for him to light into me about taking liberties with his home. But the words never come.

"You have talent, Stella," he whispers, still not looking at me. "I'm glad you used it here."

I open my mouth to respond, but he's already walking away, disappearing into the shadows.

# Chapter 17

## Stella

### it's nice to have a friend

I'm still unsure how I feel about my conversation with Alistair when I walk into the library the next morning.

I'm so caught up replaying our easy banter that I don't even notice him standing in the middle of the room until I stumble into him.

"Whoa there, Howler," he chuckles, holding my shoulders to steady me. When he glances down, his eyes widen. "Wait, are you wearing different clothes?"

I brush my hand across the borrowed bodice and split skirt that covers a pair of fitted trousers that Franchesca gave me. I'm positive that she made it all specifically for me, but I'm trying not to think about it lest I chicken out and give the clothes back.

"Yeah," I say, still impressed by Franchesca's craftsmanship. "I guess I decided that if I'm going to be free, I should start acting like it and stop looking for the strings."

I'm not sure why I say the words out loud, but when Alistair smiles, I can't bring myself to regret them.

“Freedom looks good on you, Lioness,” he nods.

Confused by the pleasure heating my cheeks, I step back. His presence is like a smoke ring, and I’m having a hard time thinking clearly while breathing his air.

So I shift my attention, trying to look at anything but him. My eyes snag on the low sofa table, where there are an assortment of fresh paints laid out beside a handful of unused brushes and a wooden pallet.

“I um…” Alistair stutters, moving to the fireplace and tripping over his own feet in the process. “I just thought that since you’re always pacing or trying to play with Narcissus while we work, that you might like to…I don’t know.” He groans, pushing at his hair. “I thought you might want to paint…or something.”

And then I notice the cloth spread across the floor and the paintings that have been removed from the wall by the fireplace. All so I can paint.

When I don’t respond, Alistair cringes and hides his face behind his hands. “Maybe it was a silly idea.” Seeing this rare show of awkwardness, I feel a renewed sense of patience for him. I’ve never seen him act so human before.

“You want me to paint a mural. Here?”

He drops his hands and rolls his eyes, disguising his embarrassment behind annoyance. “You don’t have to, I just thought that painting made you…happy.”

“It does.”

“Then yes,” he waves at the wall, “I want you to paint here.”

I cross my arms, annoyed with him for not being who I expected him to be.

“What did I do wrong now?” he asks, exasperated. “I didn’t insult your looks even though no one’s nose has ever been that large before, and I didn’t say any derogatory nicknames.” He pauses, tapping his chin. “Did I?”

I sigh, shaking my head. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Alistair. But we will be coming back to the comment about my nose.”

“So then what is it?”

“I’m just annoyed because I thought I knew who I was dealing with, and then you go and change on me. Now I don’t know how to feel.”

Instead of looking angry, he nods. “Believe me, Snow Cat, it doesn’t make sense to me either. I’m not exactly someone prone to change, so…I don’t know how to feel about myself at the moment.”

My stone heart begins to soften, blood filling the dried up crevices as a thrum of hope begins to pump new life through the long dead organ. I want to trust Alistair, but trust is dangerous. And someone related to the duke can’t be trusted blindly.

But then I think of the letter I found in Alistair’s room after I first arrived. It was degrading and filled with mockery. Orrin clearly doesn’t think very highly of his brother, only using him as a prop piece to accomplish his own goals.

But being a puppet might not bother Alistair. I’ve known since we met that appearances were something for him to manipulate for the sake of an end goal. *Would he really be willing to give up his freedom to be Orrin’s lackey though?*

The answer comes quick and certain. *No.*

Alistair is stubborn and cloaked in resentment. I can’t imagine him allowing himself to be used so freely. In fact, I suspect that he would be

quicker to act against his brother than help him after being left here to rot…

“What brought on this change?” I ask.

He rubs his jaw, smiling ruefully. There’s mischief on his face, but it’s the fear in his eyes that makes my hope glow. *He feels insecure*. Which means that he cares what I think.

“I saw this painting that knocked something loose,” he says vaguely, not meeting my gaze.

“Oh? What did it knock loose?”

He gives me a pointed look that says he knows what I’m doing. But I just smile, and he groans. “Hope, Slither. It made me feel hope.”

His reluctant words breed dangerous things in my mind. For a moment, I imagine that he’s softening *because* of me. For me.

It’s a futile thought that will only bring pain, but I hold onto it anyway. Because hope is what keeps me going, what gives me the strength I need to survive and the motivation to find freedom.

I’ll nurture it, even if it destroys me in the end. Because if I don’t have hope, I’ll give up. And that is not an option.

I pick up a brush and twirl it in my hand, Narcissus twining around my legs. “So, what should I paint?”

Alistair purses his lips in thought and then smiles, this one full of genuine joy instead of plotting or victory at having the upper hand.

“Something…honest,” he replies, and despite my bones telling me to run, to view him as a threat and stay away, I feel a tether tightening between us.

I’ve been surviving for years, the only hope I allowed myself was one of freedom. *But it’s not enough anymore*. Not when freedom means

loneliness. What I need is something to hold onto, something *real*. And even if Alistair lets me down, the hope that he won't is enough.

Because after years of emotional isolation, it's nice to have a friend.

# Chapter 18

## Alistair

### this is me tryIng

"Someone wants to make a good impression," Brutus taunts, sliding scones onto a tray.

I glare at his bald head, opting not to respond. I've been in everyone's good graces for a few days now and I'm finding that I…like it. *Ugh, I'm getting soft.*

But it's different to have them treat me like someone they actually want to see. I'm used to being avoided. I used to think that was a sign of power. Now I'm not so sure.

I can't say I'm happy about the affect Stella is having on me, but I can't say that I'm sad about it either. I've never felt welcome like this. Never felt wanted by anyone other than my parents. And Lord knows I messed that up too.

"Shut up, Brutus," I snap, trying to shake off the direction my thoughts have taken. "Or my fist will make an impression on your face."

Brutus just snickers, and I scowl, wondering if it's wise for me to lose my edge. If no one believes my threats, then how will I keep them in line?

“Oh, don’t tease the boy,” Mildred says, patting my shoulder.

“Yes, leave him be. He’s doing something nice,” Franchesca nods. “We should encourage it.”

“Well, I, for one, think it’s sweet,” Maddy grins, her young face lighting up with innocent excitement. She’s practically bouncing as she carries the tea over to the tray.

“Yes, very sweet,” Christine says dryly, taking the tea from Maddy before it has a chance to slosh over. “Now stop jumping.”

“Don’t mind us,” Milly winks, nudging my shoulder. “We’re just excited to see you happy, Alistair.”

I stare up at her, unsure. *Am I happy?*

It’s hard to tell. It’s been so long, I’m not sure I remember what real happiness is. I’m sure I haven’t felt it since I was a young boy, back before Orrin became so dark and cruel.

*Is that what this strange, calm feeling is though? Am I happy?* More importantly, what caused it?

I’m lost in my head, trying to convince myself that Stella had nothing to do with it, when the staff pushes me out of the kitchen, a tray of scones and tea in my hands. I walk to the library, stubbornly telling myself that no woman could have such an effect on me.

I would be lying if I said that Stella hasn’t impacted me to some degree. But how much? Better yet, do I like it?

I have to admit that I feel lighter since she arrived, but I also feel less in control. And that, I don’t like.

Stella is standing on a short ladder when I enter the library. She has a wooden pallet holding blobs of paint in one hand and a brush in the other.

The wall is half charcoal sketches and half painting and I'm taken aback when I see the progress she's made.

When I asked her to paint something honest, I thought maybe she would paint more scenes from her childhood, or a place that made her feel happy.

What she's done instead is a little more honest than I was shooting for.

The middle of the wall is still empty, but on the far sides, two faces are sketched out, their bodies only shown to their shoulders. Stella has begun painting the woman, the details so carefully done that she almost looks real.

Green eyes stare back at me from the wall, a worried look on the woman's face. Wind tears at her hair and she bears bruises and cuts on her cheeks and collar bone.

But she's not the thing that disturbs me.

The face on the other side of the wall is arrogant. He stares at me like the world is his for the taking, not a hair out of place on his head and a smirk tilting his lips. The only way to describe his expression is hungry.

"You've gotten quite a bit further." I swallow, unable to look away from the half-started mural. I saw her sketches yesterday while we worked, but the man's face had only been an empty oval then.

Stella, surprised by my presence, gasps at the sound of my voice, teetering on the ladder. I abandon the tea tray on the table and rush forward to balance her before she can fall.

It's not until her eyes meet mine, my hands securely on her waist, that I realize how close we're standing.

Over the past weeks, we've been careful not to breach each other's physical space. It felt safer that way.

This…does not.

“Are you okay?” I ask, trying my best to sound unbothered even though I’m having a hard time drawing breath. Her waist is soft beneath my touch, and it has my ears going hot.

She nods, her eyes a little wide. “Yes. Thank you.”

“So,” I stutter, turning to the tray of scones so she can’t see my blush. “We’re the subject of your mural?”

“Oh, um…yes. You said you wanted something honest.”

“So, you thought you would paint me as you honestly see me. Conceited, greedy, self-obsessed.” I don’t mean to sound like such a jerk, but my strange reaction to her has me feeling off center.

“The painting isn’t finished,” Stella defends, narrowing her eyes at me.

“Don’t change it on my account,” I snap, hating the sound of my own voice as the words tumble from my mouth. But I can’t stop. Knowing that this is how she sees me cuts me to the bone. *I thought we were making progress.* “If a monster is what you see me as, that’s fine. I’m just glad I’m not the only monster up there.”

Stella’s expression turns from exasperation to hurt, her face going slack as I call her a monster. I want to slap myself for the pain I see in her eyes. All these weeks spent building bits of trust and now it crumbles under the weight of stupid words from a stupid man.

“Stella,” I sigh, noting the similarities between her and the self-portrait behind her. The Stella before me isn’t beautiful like the painting, but they both share the same expressive green eyes and wild hair. And even though the Stella I see is plain, I know the painting on the wall is accurate. Someone that beautiful on the inside must be beautiful on the outside.

“I didn’t mean that,” I groan, annoyed that I’m not more eloquent. “I—you have to understand that this is all new to me. I’m…” I glare at the

sketch of my face on the wall. “I’ve been him for so long. Angry, afraid, and yes, greedy. Greedy for recognition and praise and affection. None of it came easily for me, so I took it.”

Stella’s expression is still hard and stubborn, but there’s empathy in her eyes. I hold onto that.

“I don’t try, Tigress,” I shrug helplessly. “I find the easiest way out, the shortcut to the reward. I take credit and reputations, stealing accomplishments that I didn’t earn. Believe me, I know who I am. But—” I growl, shoving my hands roughly through my hair. “I *want* to try…When I’m around you, I want to try.”

When Stella’s expression remains guarded, I take a cautious step closer. “So, I’m asking you—begging, actually—to be patient with me. Because it may not seem like it, but this is me trying.”

She tracks my movements but doesn’t stop me when I stand at the bottom of the ladder. She’s a few inches taller than me like this, but I don’t hate it.

I’m starting to realize that she’s far above me anyway.

I see the thoughts flying through her, the way she weighs the risks and rewards, wondering if it’s worth it to give me a chance. *Please say it is.*

“The mural isn’t finished yet,” she whispers after making me wait. “This is just the beginning.”

“So, you’re telling me that there’s hope,” I tease lightly, unsure if it’s wise to push her lest she change her mind and reject me.

Her lips twitch. “There is if you give me a scone. Otherwise, I’ll give your portrait a few warts.”

I’m about to fulfill her request when I pause, stopping just short of grabbing her hand. “Do you think you’ll always see me that way?” I don’t

have to explain, she knows I'm talking about the painting.

She looks from me to the mural and back again. "I don't see you that way now."

Just like that, my spirits lift, and I grin. "Good."

When I get her a scone, I'm whistling, feeling lighter than I did when I came in. We work as usual the rest of the day, arguing a little, bickering a lot, and trust blooming little by little. And by the time we leave for dinner, I realize that the differences between the painting of Stella and the real-life version are much smaller than I remember.

# Chapter 19

## Stella

### have a little truSt

"Please tell me you did that on purpose," I say, laughing as Alistair's rock plops into the lake with a pathetic splash.

The night air is cool as we stand on the lakeshore, and I pull my blanket closer around my shoulders. Since Alistair can't be out in the sunlight, we've begun the habit of taking evening walks after dinner.

Although all it's done is show me how bad Alistair is at skipping rocks.

"Of course it was on purpose," he scoffs, flicking another flat rock into the lake. But instead of skipping, it plunks to the bottom like all the previous ones. "That one was on purpose too."

"You're a lost cause," I taunt, whipping my rock out across the water. It skips three times before sinking. I flash Alistair a victorious grin, and he shakes his head. "*That* is how you skip rocks."

"Alright, then show me, oh superior rock skipper." His smirk is insufferable, but I humor him despite my better judgment.

Stepping closer, I hand him a rock, rearranging his fingers around its edges. It's a little difficult to see in the shadows, but the lights shining

from the manor and the glow of the half-moon give us enough to see by.

"Move your thumb a little bit," I whisper. I'm not sure why I feel the need to be quiet. The dark makes the moment feel private somehow.

"Like this?" he asks, his breath rustling my hair. I force myself to keep still, focusing solely on his hand.

But then his fingers go rogue and capture a few of mine.

"Alistair…"

"Hm?" He sounds happy. Too happy.

I look up and find him grinning villainously, tickled to have an effect on me no doubt. "Stop messing around," I say with a glare.

"I'm not messing around. I am trying to learn."

"I think you're trying to learn something other than how to skip rocks."

I don't realize that he's stepped closer until his chest is pressed against my side, his eyes cast in shadows. He looks dangerous like this, tempting.

My stomach twists.

"And what is it that I'm trying to learn?" his voice is low and soft—out here in the dark, it feels as if we're the only two people in the world.

"How to get to me," I manage to get out, embarrassed at the way my heart races.

His responding smile is soft, his eyes tracing my face. "Oh, I figured that out after your first week here, Little Alpha."

"Is that why I find you so insufferable?"

But he isn't insulted by my words. He looks downright pleased.

"Oh, come on, Freckles. You don't find me insufferable."

"Believe me, I do," I argue weakly.

He leans closer, his breath rustling my hair and skimming across my temple. "Liar."

Rattled by the way my gut clenches and my ears go hot, I drop my hand from his and put a few inches of space between us. “Just throw the rock, Al.”

His eyes linger on me, still smiling. Then he flicks the rock, and it skips twice on the lake’s smooth surface before it sinks.

I narrow my eyes at him. “You knew how to do that the whole time, didn’t you?”

He turns, invading my space. “I’ve been stuck here for four years with very little to entertain me. What do you think?”

I roll my eyes and walk away. I’m not genuinely angry, but watching him squirm has become a favorite pastime of mine.

When I hear him come after me a moment later, I smile. *Like clockwork.*

“Come on, Stella. You can’t blame a man for making up an excuse to be close to you.”

“You mean the unattractive waif of a girl who’s nose you once said was big enough for three people’s faces?” I retort, but the words are empty of any real animosity. His insults toward my appearance have been all but nonexistent lately and there are times when he looks at me and doesn’t seem to hate what he sees.

“Hey now, I haven’t commented on your nose in days,” he argues, taking my arm and sliding it through the crook of his elbow. “Honestly, the longer you’re here, the more I wonder if I imagined what you looked like in the beginning.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugs, guiding us around a mole hill. “I mean that I still don’t see you the way you painted yourself in the library, but you look different than you did when you first got here.”

“What do I look like now?”

“Plain. Not pretty, not ugly. Just kind of forgettable. But sometimes you seem a bit blurry to me, like the curse is hiding you.”

I mull his words over, wondering if this change is due to him seeing beauty differently now, or if it’s because he sees *me* differently. Not just as a coworker, but a friend…

“Except for the eyes,” he continues. “They’re so expressive it’s almost distracting.”

A bit of pride puffs up inside me and I quickly tamp it down. Who cares if Alistair finds my eyes distracting?

“Master!” Brutus shouts, pulling me from my thoughts. His bald head reflects the moonlight as he runs over to us, looking grim. “There’s a visitor at the gate. Says he wants to speak to you.”

Alistair goes rigid at my side.

Gone is the man who is quick to smirk and always teasing. In his place is a stern man of business, a threatening presence of authority. If I didn’t know him, I would be afraid.

But my fear is already spoken for, coming alive at the news that a man is at the gate. What if it’s one of Orrin’s men? If Alistair confirms that I’m here…I shake my head. *I’m not going back.* I just need to see who the visitor is—

“Stella, go inside,” Alistair commands abruptly.

“But—”

He spins me, setting his hands on my arms. I’m surprised by the intense worry in his eyes, and the desperate tone of his voice. “Stella, I need you to go inside…*Please*.”

I want to outright refuse, but I don't trust him not to have Brutus carry me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes if I say no. "Fine," I sigh. "Just this once."

Alistair releases a deep breath, his shoulders relaxing a fraction. "I'll be back," he says, watching as Brutus leads me toward the manor.

Once he's convinced that I'm actually doing as he asked, Alistair heads for the front gate. I can't see the gate from here, but I'm almost certain I know who's waiting at it.

"He'll be fine, Miss Stella," Brutus assures me once we're inside, mistaking the reason for my anxiety.

I give him a reassuring smile. "I know." But it's not Alistair that I'm worried about.

The cook watches me like he expects me to run. "Don't worry, you can trust him to take care of our visitor."

I nod but don't say anything. As much as I would love to agree with Brutus, I don't know if I can trust Alistair with this. I don't want to think that he would hand me over to Orrin, but that all depends on whether or not Alistair would believe his brother.

The moment Brutus disappears around the corner, I slip back outside, keeping to the perimeter of the manor, trying to stay low and out of sight.

By the time my eyes land on him, Alistair has almost made it to the gate. Where a shadowed figure waits.

I dart off to the trees, sneaking as close as I can get without being seen.

"What do you want?" Alistair barks, and my stomach sinks at the sight of the man standing on the other side of the iron gate.

"Information," the man says with a lazy smile, his black hair pulled into a low ponytail. *Jareth.*

He looks smug, as usual. Even when Orrin punished him for being rough with me Jareth was never truly cowed. He's too arrogant for that. He doesn’t want to be controlled by the duke any more than I do. His favorite form of rebellion is being cruel to me when he thinks he can get away with it.

But even the times that the duke didn’t catch him, I did. I smile vindictively. *I hope he still has that scar on his forearm.*

He should have known better than to try and ruffle a woman who’s trained with knives.

“I don’t waste time gossiping with peasants,” Alistair scoffs, turning from the gate.

Jareth’s self-righteous attitude falls at the rise of his desperation. He grips the bars, pressing his face against them. He’s not wearing his usual uniform and I wonder why he hasn’t announced that he works for the duke. *Unless Orrin thinks his brother will be difficult about handing me over.*

But I’m afraid to hope.

“Wait,” Jareth pleads. “I’m looking for a girl. She’s tall and thin—a gangly thing. She has a bunch of dark hair, and she has a way of finding trouble.”

I see the way Alistair’s face goes slack and the panic that quickly sinks in. But with his back turned to Jareth, the guard doesn’t catch it.

There’s a stretched silence as I watch Alistar consider his options. He’s known me for such a short time. He owes me no loyalty. It would be reasonable for him to ask Jareth for more information or to hand me over to the guard. And if he does, I shouldn’t be hurt by it. Shouldn’t be surprised or disappointed.

I've been betrayed before, been sold out and had people turn on me. It always hurts a little, but I can't blame people for choosing their own safety over mine. Orrin is a dangerous man and everyone knows it.

The Baron is the only person I've ever met who was willing to take on the consequences of freeing me. I shouldn't take it personally if Alistair isn't willing to be so altruistic.

"A girl you say?" Alistair asks, turning back to Jareth. His voice is so cool, so unbothered, that I can't tell what he's thinking.

"Yes. She's gone rogue," Jareth says eagerly, a mutt trying to impress the bigger dog in hopes for scraps. "She's very dangerous."

"Well then you probably shouldn't have lost her," Alistair condemns him harshly. "I don't receive visitors here. Your girl is not with me, and I would advise you not to lose any more of your people in my territory."

Jareth's face pales and he steps back from the bars. "Thank you, sir. I will ensure that no one bothers you in the future."

"See that you do." Alistair's voice goes dangerously dark, and Jareth turns and all but runs back the other way.

I wait a few minutes in my hiding place, watching Alistair as he watches Jareth's departure. When Alistair turns from the gate and I'm sure Jareth is gone, I step out from the trees. It takes Al a moment to realize what he's seeing as his eyes skim over me.

But then he becomes angry.

"What the bloody hell are you doing out here?" he whisper-shouts, stomping my way. "I told you to go inside. What if that man had seen you? Do you have any idea—oof!"

He stumbles a step as I crash into him, but his arms quickly bind around me, holding me close against his chest.

Moments pass but I don’t release my hold on his neck, basking in this rare feeling of safety.

With one hand on my hair, Alistair cradles me gently, and I almost cry at the tenderness of it. The last time someone held me like this was before my mother died. I didn’t realize how hungry I was for such unconditional affection until Alistair stood in the gap, bringing a relief that makes my eyes sting.

“Something could have happened to you,” he whispers angrily. But I don’t care that he’s mad, I’m just grateful to feel his breath on my ear, his heartbeat pounding wildly against my chest.

“Something almost did,” I insist, squeezing him tighter. “But you didn’t turn me over.”

He tries to push me back, but I hold tight. “Stella, let go a little. I want to see your face.”

I reluctantly loosen my grip and he nudges me back a few inches, enough to search my features in the moonlight. His expression is one of concern, but it’s deeper than that. There’s a wildness to the emotion that I can’t quite put my finger on.

Like maybe losing me would have hurt him the same way I’m realizing that it would hurt me…

“Why would you think that I would turn you over to that creep?” he demands, offended.

I look down, studying the buttons on his shirt. But his finger slides under my chin, lifting my gaze.

“Do you still not trust me?” The question is asked with such hurt, that I immediately regret not trusting him more.

I open my mouth to tell him so, but no sound comes out. What am I supposed to say? That I'm not sure I know how to trust but he makes me want to?

At my hesitation, his face fills with understanding. "I guess I have some work to do."

"No." Feeling a little braver in the face of his doubt, I push a lock of his sandy blonde hair from his face. "You don't. Because what you just did proved that I can trust you."

"I would never betray you Slither," he insists. "I need you to believe that. To have a little trust in me."

"I do."

"Good. Because that man is not getting anywhere near you. He sounded like he had a personal vendetta against you."

When I say nothing, Alistair's eyes go cold. "Stella, did that man hurt you?"

I hesitate.

"Tell me, please. Did he harm you?" He swallows, restraining his anger for my benefit. "Did he…do I need to track him down and castrate him?"

Despite the content of our conversation, I smile, warmed to be worried over. "No. He didn't hurt me like that."

Alistair's face becomes dark with rage. "But he did hurt you."

"He likes hurting people he deems below him," I explain quickly, holding him tighter so he can't do something stupid like chase Jareth down. "It makes him feel powerful. But I got retribution. He mostly leaves me alone anymore. It's not worth it to him to gain another scar at my hand."

Alistair is quiet, and I can see him struggling not to go after Jareth with a knife of his own. “If I see him again, I’ll hurt him,” he growls.

“I won’t stop you.”

He groans, pulling me into his side as he leads us back to the manor. “I am glad to hear that you gave him some scars to remember you by.”

“Me too. Although I think seeing him run away from you was the highlight of my year.”

He becomes serious. “Anyone else who comes for you won’t leave here with all their appendages still attached. I promise. I’m not going to let anyone get to you.”

I relax into his hold, finally feeling like there are some new, bright memories to outshine the damaged ones. Instead of Orrin’s greedy face haunting my dreams as I fall asleep later, I see Alistair.

The scene from the gate repeats on a loop, him choosing me again and again. And when I wake the next day, I realize that even though my trust is rusty from disuse, it’s found its way to Alistair.

He’s not his brother, and I’m starting to believe that if Alistair knew what his brother did to me, he might take my side. But regardless, I’ve taken his.

‘Have a little trust in me,’ he asked. But I think he’s earned more than just a little.

# Chapter 20

## Alistair

tHe rain is always gonna come,
if you're standing with me

For two nights now, I've replayed that moment at the gate when the awful man came for Stella. Only in the dream, I don't send him away. I turn her in.

It's not me in the dreams—I know that. It's the me from the mirror. The one with blood on his mouth and an insatiable hunger for power. But it scares me all the same.

I remember when Stella first arrived. All I cared about was getting her out of my life as quickly as possible. It was the same with all the women before her. There were a few who made an attempt to unthaw my frozen heart. Jessica came close, but I remained a coward clothed in self-proclaimed superiority.

As seen by the way I treated Stella up until very recently.

But the other night brought everything into perspective. *I made her feel safe.*

The way she relaxed in my arms was euphoric. I've never been responsible for making someone feel secure before, never been someone

people go to for protection. I was the lesser of the two evils between me and Orrin, but never a haven.

Stella's is the first real trust I've ever earned.

*I'm going to break it*, I think to myself, pacing in front of the fireplace in the library. Stella's trust is so new and fragile. I wasn't even sure she was capable of it until the other night. And me with the sloppy hands and misaligned gaze set on goals that don't matter are going to completely shatter it.

"Al?" I turn at the sound of her voice. She stands in the doorway, a dressing gown tossed over a deep, coral pink nightgown. Her curly brown hair is a mess, the mass of it pulled over one shoulder. She looks sleepy, her eyes blinking slowly. And as I search her face for the features that I'd at first found so repulsive, I come up short.

It's as I told her. She isn't beautiful the way her portrait on the wall behind me is, but neither is she ugly. There's almost an invisible veil over her features and rather than looking deformed, they are simply unclear to me.

"Don't you look fetching in pink," I smile, though the expression doesn't reach my eyes.

"What's going on?" She asks, walking over to meet me in front of the fire, concerned. "You don't look well."

"Well, aren't you full of compliments."

I sit on the couch, pretending to be as indifferent as I used to be. Perhaps if I try hard enough, I can get back there. *But to what end?*

Do I even want to go back to the castle? Do I want to marry a woman like Carissa, living life as strangers who wed for money?

One glance at Stella and I shake my head. *No.* I don't want that.

But the uncertainty of these new feelings, the lack of control—and worse, the fear of pain—are almost debilitating in their grip.

"Al, come on. What's wrong?" she insists, sitting on the low table in front of me. Narcissus finds her almost immediately, meowing as he clambers onto her lap.

"How come you don't cuddle me that way?"

Stella smacks my knee. "*Tell me what's wrong.*"

"Ow," I complain, rubbing the spot even though it didn't really hurt. "Mean kitty." When she reaches out to smack me again, I scoot back. "Okay, okay! I haven't exactly been sleeping well the last few nights."

Her face falls. "Are you…are you having second thoughts?"

It takes me a moment to understand what she means; the concept is so foreign and *wrong* to me. "What? No! Stella, of course I'm not having second thoughts about sending that disgusting man away. I *am* having second thoughts about letting him leave with his skin still attached to his body though."

She bites her lip, looking shy as the firelight dances across her face. "Sorry, I just…trust is hard for me. I trust you, but every second that I'm not with you, doubt starts poking at it, trying to tear it down."

"Well then I guess we'll need to have a bed brought in here, so I won't have to leave your side," I say, only half teasing. She rolls her eyes. "Right, being serious now. It makes sense that your trust is a little rickety. I mean, I haven't exactly given you *my* trust yet. Maybe you would feel a little steadier if I did…"

"You don't have to do that."

"I know," I tap my thigh, thinking. What would it take for me to fully trust Stella? *If she knew me—really knew me—and didn't run away.*

But that would require me to be honest about things that I haven't spoken of to anyone. Ever.

*Is it worth it?* I look at her, focusing not on her blurred features, but on her eyes. They're so expressive, showing me worry, hope, and a fear I know all too well.

The fear of rejection.

"I want to trust you," I say, certain of my decision. "I want to tell you the truth."

I almost tell her not to think differently of me once she hears the story, but I refrain. Would it really be trust if I demanded to own her reactions the way Orrin always did with mine? I don't want to be her monster.

"I've mentioned my parents a little bit," I begin, anxiously bouncing my leg. Stella nods patiently. "My mother is fiery—like you. She never lets anyone tell her what to do. It's nearly got her killed more than once."

"Sounds like I would like her," Stella smiles.

"Oh, she would love you. So would my father," the smile my mother's memory brought slips from my face at the thought of my father. "He was calmer than Mother, with a quiet but stern way about him. And even though he intimidated people without trying, I never once felt afraid of him. He always ensured that my brother and I felt loved."

I leave out the small detail that my father was the Duke of Roburry and that my brother inherited the title. I want Stella to judge *me,* not the former heir to the duchy.

"My brother and I were being groomed to take over for Father when he was ready to retire," I explain, bypassing the details as I study the fire licking against the stone. "But my father was concerned that my brother may not be well suited to authority. He thought my brother was too

apathetic. So, he began turning more and more of his attention on me, preparing me in ways that he didn't prepare my brother."

Stella is silent as I speak, but she's smart enough to know that this story doesn't have a happy ending.

"My father eventually became ill. No one knew what was wrong with him, but he lost energy quickly, becoming bedridden. He was in the process of formally making me his successor when he passed away."

Before Stella can offer words of comfort, I glare at her. "Don't pity me yet, Freckles. The story gets worse."

She doesn't respond, meeting my gaze without so much as a flinch.

"When I arrived one morning to check on my father before he died, my brother was there. I assumed my father was asleep and I fought with my brother. I had never wanted my father's position and all the responsibility that came with it. I was angry that my brother's poor behavior meant that I had to take his place." I shake my head, disappointed by the memory. "My brother accused me of being weak and stormed from the room. I was so angry with him that it took me a few minutes to realize that my father wasn't breathing."

Despite my fears that Stella will hate me once she hears the end of the story, I hold her gaze, determined to make her hate me to my face.

"On his bedside table was a cup. My gut told me there was something off. So I took the cup to an apothecary and he confirmed my fears. Poison. My brother had murdered my father, but instead of taking this information to the court, I disposed of the cup and never spoke of it to a soul. I went to my father's burial and watched my brother feign tears, never warning my mother that the man who killed her husband stood holding her arm."

I feel the backs of my eyes burning, but I refuse to cry. I hate myself for what I didn't do, but I won't let Stella see how much. Not if she's going to hate me too.

"I regret not making my brother pay for the murder of my father," I say, choking on my own emotion. "But that's who I am, Stella. I'm a coward. I do whatever gives me the most comfortable outcome. I don't sacrifice and I'm not generous. I want your trust, but I don't deserve it."

I'm prepared for her to call me selfish and leave. Or to give me some speech about how I'm not as cowardly as I think. What I'm not prepared for is for her to sit beside me on the sofa and take my hands in her own.

"Don't pity me," I growl, trying to stand. But she yanks me back down.

"I wouldn't dream of it," she hisses, defiant. "You don't deserve pity, Alistair. What you did was wrong, but you don't need me to tell you that."

"Then what do I need?"

She seems to grow taller in her seat, looking more equipped to lead than I ever dreamed of being. She's almost regal, even with her messy hair and disarrayed nightgown.

"You need someone to look you in the eye, knowing who you've been and what you've done, and choose to stay. Not because you can give them something or because of a potential they hope you'll grow into. But simply because they care about *you* as you are."

I shake my head. "You can't care about me. The rain is always gonna come if you're standing with me, Stella. Even if I don't make the same mistakes again, I'll still be paying for the old ones."

She shrugs. "Then let it rain. I'll be here."

Taken aback, I blink as a few tears break through my walls. "Why? Why would you do that?"

“I met you under duress,” she says, squeezing my hands. “I was afraid, and you were rude and apathetic. If anyone was going to choose to run from you, it would be me. But I’m here, Al. I’m here and I’m not going anywhere, because…I know it’s not been long,” she looks down, suddenly insecure, “But I feel like I know you. Not just the cowardly you that let your brother walk free or the you who rejected me for not being pretty, or the you that Milly dotes on. Not just the you who brings me paints or the one who argues with me about explorers or the you who builds a fire when you can tell I’m cold and too stubborn to admit it.” She smiles ruefully, her green-eyed gaze soft. “I feel like I know the center of you where everything else stems out from, and I think that gives me the authority to say that you’re worth sitting next to as you are.”

I wait a moment until I’m sure I won’t sob, then I squeeze her fingers the way she squeezed mine. I despise the vulnerability coursing through me, cracking me open like a corpse to be dissected. But strangely, I trust Stella to be the one poking around.

“You do know me,” I assure her quietly, too self-conscious about the words to say them very loud. “I don’t think anyone in my life has ever known as many parts of me as you do. It’s terrifying, but it also feels…”

“Nice,” she says, completing the thought. “It feels nice to be known and accepted for it.”

“You know,” I tug her closer, putting my arm around her shoulders, “You’re worth sitting beside too.”

She lets me pull her back against the sofa, propped against my side. “Yeah?”

“Mhm. We’re quite the pair, damaged and untrusting.”

“But we trust each other.” She says it like a question, and I resolve to take away any lingering doubt in her mind. I’ve failed at so many things, but I won’t fail at this.

“Yes, we do. And Stella?”

“Hm?” She tilts her head on my shoulder, meeting my eyes.

I’m taken aback by how close our faces are—and shocked by how much closer I’d like them to be. *Where did that come from?* It takes me a second to shake away the intrusive thoughts, stowing them away for closer inspection later.

“Thank you for listening and not running from me,” I whisper.

“You’re welcome. Thank you for trusting me with your story.”

I smile and rest my head on hers, content as Narcissus finds his way over to our laps, pawing our hands until we pet him.

All my life, I’ve wanted to be chosen. Not second best, not the spare son, not Orrin’s brother. Just Alistair, someone’s first choice.

And while I don’t know if Stella would choose to be this close to me if we were both free of the manor, I’m starting to realize that I want her to. And whether or not she does, I think I’m starting to choose her.

# Chapter 21

## Stella

### everything has changed

"What are you doing in here at this time of the morning?" Mildred asks, setting a teacup in front of me on the table. The kitchen is bustling with activity. Brutus and Kaitlyn are making breakfast while Carson and David clean up after them. Becca, Christine, and Maddy are listening as Tilda and Denise give them their tasks for the day and Franchesca is sewing in a chair in the corner.

Early morning light is just beginning to shine through the windows on the other side of the room, scattering across the pages in front of me. I'm momentarily distracted by the way the light reflects off the glassware on the table, startled when a hand snaps in front of my face.

"Thinking of anything in particular?" Milly taunts, smiling. I don't have to ask to know what she's referring to.

The staff have been incorrigible where Alistair is concerned, insisting that more is going on between us than there is.

Feeling the oncoming blush, I look down at the pages in front of me. "No."

Becca and Maddy laugh at the other end of the table. I stick my tongue out at them, but they only laugh harder. I sip my tea to hide my smile.

“You seem to be in much better spirits these days,” Tilda points out, raising an eyebrow at me. She has a list of chores in front of her and her dark hair is pulled back into a braid, somehow free of grey even though I know she must be fifty.

“Yes, you’re even wearing the clothes I made,” Franchesca agrees, glancing up at me as she sews a shirt, so at ease with the task that she doesn’t even need to watch the needle.

“And the master isn’t nearly as cantankerous as of late,” Brutus pipes up, grinning at me over his shoulder. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you Miss Stella?”

I stick my tongue out at him too.

“Yeah,” David nods, a grin splitting his young face as he gets in on the game. “He’s barely even scary since you arrived Miss Stella.”

Trying to ignore their mocking, I grab my quill and make a few notes on the parchment about a pair of enchanted scissors that can sever magical connections. They were last seen three week’s ride from here, and I doubt they’re in the manor, but I can’t afford to rule out any possible loopholes.

“Hm…” Milly hums, wiping down the table around my papers. For the third time.

“Milly, if you want to snoop, just snoop. You don’t have to stand on ceremony,” I say, giving her a pointed look.

She grins, her wrinkled face brightening. “If you’re sure you don’t mind.” Before I can tell her whether or not I do, she keeps talking. “Now why don’t you tell us how things have been going with Alistair.”

I groan, rolling my shoulders as I glare at the many pairs of eyes watching me around the room. “You all need hobbies,” I complain, rubbing my temple.

“You *are* our hobby,” Becca teases with a wink. I want to toss a bit of my scone at her freckles, but I resist. They can’t leave the manor and they have no other source of news but what Alistair can scrounge up from the closest village. So, I suppose I can’t begrudge them for being interested in my life.

Even if it is a little annoying.

“Go on, tell us how you’re getting along with the master,” Brutus says, fluttering his eyes and doing his best imitation of the girls.

I laugh. Normally, I don’t make a habit of being so relaxed around others, but here at the manor, my usual fears don’t seem quite so prevalent. “It’s been going well,” I admit. “Which I’m sure you all know from the spying you’ve been doing.”

Carson scoffs, and I note the way his eyes keep drifting over to Maddy. “It’s not spying, it’s reconnaissance.”

“That’s the same thing, you idiot,” Kaitlyn corrects, shaking her head beside her father. She may not look exactly like him, but she certainly acts like him.

“Oh,” Carson deflates, ducking his head. “Sorry Miss Stella.”

“Don’t apologize. You were coerced by older and wiser minds.” I look over at the matrons in the room and they all smile unapologetically.

“The master does seem different,” Denise admits, shier about prying than the other women. “A little softer now. It can’t be a coincidence that the change happened after you arrived.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I insist, turning back to the book in front of me. I agree that Alistair has changed, but he’s the one who did the changing, not me. He needed someone to tell him the truth, but the rest he’s done on his own.

“I think you underestimate your impact,” Milly says kindly, reaching out to touch my hand.

I shake my head. “Alistair is the one who did all the work.”

“Well of course he did,” she says, as if this was obvious. “If all he needed was someone to force him to change, then he would have been changed ages ago. But you didn’t force him to change, did you?”

“No. It wouldn’t have worked.”

“Exactly. We’re not saying that you alone changed him, but you can’t deny that your presence here has ignited something in him that led to the changes.”

And I don’t. Alistair is different since I first arrived. But all I did was be honest with him.

I’m sure Milly has done the same thing…But knowing the housekeeper, she also reminded him of his potential on a daily basis. *Is that all he needed? To have someone who didn’t expect him to live up to anything?*

“If things are going so well, then why are you hiding in here instead of waiting for the master in the library?” Christine asks in her sweet, noninvasive way. I look at her, her honey brown hair catching the light and her kind smile so genuine it’s almost painful to look at. She’s so old for someone so young, having been the adult for her sisters for so long.

She deserves more. They all do.

“I’m trying to find something that will help me out of a predicament,” I explain tentatively. Even Alistair doesn’t know the extent of my situation,

and I’m loathe to share the details.

I don’t want him to know what his brother has done. I’m afraid it would hurt him more than the duke has hurt me. Orrin may have killed their father, but that was six years ago. I can see it in Alistair’s eyes that he holds onto hope for his brother.

*I can’t steal that from him.*

“Let’s just say that the person I ran from has magical means to keep me under their control,” I explain evasively. “And when my three months of the curse are up, and my…master comes for me, they will be able to take me. Unless I can find a way out of it.”

Milly’s hand squeezes mine, and I find a hurricane of empathy and fury in her eyes. “Whatever we can do to help, we will. Any master that comes for you will regret it.”

*She’s wrong.* The master she expects is not the one that’s coming And even if the entire staff were willing to take on the duke for me, Orrin is nearly impossible to kill. He’s strong—too strong—and very paranoid, which means that he’s always three steps ahead. I’ve contemplated killing him myself, but I couldn’t risk trying unless I was sure I could accomplish it.

“Surely there’s a way out of this predicament,” Tilda says worriedly. “He can’t hold you under his control forever.”

“Oh, but he can,” I growl, thinking of the ring he wears on a chain around his neck. He never takes it off and every time I’m near it, I can feel the heat pulsating toward me. Latching onto me like a handcuff. “My only saving grace is that he has to be in close proximity for the magic to work. But I imagine it won’t take him long to look for me here. And if he finds me…”

“You’ll lose your chance at getting away,” Milly finishes angrily. “You have to leave then when your time here is up.”

“But I—” I cut myself off, unsure how much I want to admit to the group. But when I see their worried faces, I break. “I can’t leave him—Alistair.” Since I met him—since we’ve become close—everything has changed. “The curse needs to be broken. Alistair deserves to see sunlight and you all deserve to live real lives. I can’t leave until you’re all free, and even then…”

A soft smile finds its way onto Milly’s face and happy tears fill her eyes. “You don’t want to leave him at all,” she says.

I hesitate, uncomfortable with this type of honesty. I haven’t openly shared such vulnerable feelings in so long that it feels dangerous.

But in the end, I shake my head and she scoots over, folding me in her arms. “I have waited for ten years for someone to see in that boy what I do,” she says into my hair. “For *him* to see it. And now he does—now you do.”

“But if I have to leave—”

“Don’t worry about that,” she commands, giving me a stern but loving look. The kind my mother would have given me. “It will all work out. You keep looking for something that will break the contract, and we’ll work on the curse. Either way, by the time your three months have ended, one of the two will break.”

“How can you be sure?”

She smiles and shares a conspiratorial look with the other adults. “Because I’m a parent, and we have a way of knowing things.”

I want to believe her. But with every day that passes, I worry that the duke knows where I am and is just biding his time until I can be taken

away without the curse’s interference.

In a few weeks, we’ll find out.

# Chapter 22

## Alistair

### i sEe daylight

I whistle as I stroll down the hall to the kitchen. I may still be bound to the manor, the drapes might still hide the sun from my cursed skin, and I still have no real leads on how to break the curse, but I feel *good.*

Even the memories of my past don't feel as dangerous as they used to. Before, I locked them away, keeping them far from my mind so they couldn't affect me. But now, as I remember moments of my childhood and a friendship with my brother likely to never be resurrected, it doesn't hurt quite the way I thought it would.

I still feel pain and loss and regret and guilt, but it doesn't feel like the pain will be forever. In fact, I feel hopeful. It's dangerous to let feelings like this in. But I can't stop myself.

I blame Stella.

"I did not eat that many," I hear her laugh as I approach the kitchen. Peeking through the open doorway, I see her standing at the counter, a plate of cookies in front of her. She looks blissful, the sunlight streaming onto her face. There's a weightlessness to her that wasn't there before.

Maybe it’s the set of her shoulders or the way she meets everyone’s eyes without anxiety or distrust, but she looks happy. It makes me smile.

“There were a dozen cookies on that plate when you walked in here,” Kaitlyn argues, grinning at Stella, Brutus shaking his head behind her. “And I sure didn’t have any.”

Stella turns to David and Carson, raising her eyebrows.

“Don’t look at us,” David says, raising his hands in a claim of innocence. “We didn’t eat any.”

“Yeah,” Carson chimes in, “We snuck a bunch before they took them from the baking pan. Whatever was on the plate was yours.”

“I did not eat…four, five, *six cookies* in ten minutes,” Stella insists, pointing at Kaitlyn.

The girl shakes her head, her dark hair swishing. “Wasn’t me.”

Stella points to Brutus. “Brutus? Are you setting me up? It feels like something you would do.”

“Why Miss Stella, I wouldn’t dream of it,” the older man swears a little too innocently. But I know he’s only playing.

Whether or not Stella admits it, she eats like a bear about to hibernate. I bring half a dozen scones to the library every night after dinner and without exception, she eats her half and some of mine.

It’s endearing.

“Aw come on Freckles,” I drawl, waltzing into the room. “Let’s not pretend that you don’t eat my portion and yours at most meals. Especially sweets—ah!”

A wild scream tears from my lips as the sunlight I’d forgotten about slides like razors across my skin.

Dropping to the ground, I crawl behind the counter, clutching my hand to my face, and grimacing against the pain like my skin is on fire.

“Alistair!” Stella screams, crouching beside me. Her worried eyes run the length of me, and anger fills her expression when she spots the new abrasions on my hands and the one across my face.

Thank God I had my head turned when I entered the room and only one half of my face received a sun lashing.

“Kaitlyn, get me some clean damp cloths,” Stella shouts, her fingers gently inspecting the skin around my wounds. “Carson, David, I’ll need some bandages. Brutus, do you have any poultices or herbs that will help with pain and infection?”

“Aye,” he replies grimly from my other side. I jump a little, not aware that he was kneeling on my other side. He nods and then stands, moving to the cupboards.

“I’m fine, Freckles—ah! What the blazes are you doing?” I snarl as she messes with the wounds on my hands.

“I’m trying to see how bad it is,” she says, not looking away from her task.

I pull my hands away, schooling my features so the pain doesn’t show. Stella glares, and I feel my face trying to pinch into a grimace as the pain roars again.

She must see it because she shakes her head. “You’re fine? Really Alistair? Just let me help.”

“No.”

Kaitlyn brings the rags and a bowl of water and Carson and David follow with the bandages. I feel the weight of their eyes on me before Brutus sends them from the room.

“Trust, remember?” Stella whispers, some of the hair in her braid coming loose around her face. She almost looks pretty.

“What does trust have to do with burning myself like a strip of bacon?”

“Trust means admitting you need help,” she says, her voice stern. “It means letting someone get close enough to help.”

I hate that her words make sense. But I don’t stop her when she takes a damp cloth and starts cleaning the blood from my wounds, letting out a few hisses here and there. It is genuinely painful, but I’m being a bit overdramatic because I’m put out about being coddled.

“Stop fussing, or I’ll start calling you Alison,” Stella warns me, a mischievous look in her eyes as Brutus hands her a poultice.

“You’re mean,” I complain as Brutus leaves us alone in the kitchen, chuckling on his way out. “And so is he.”

Stella sets the bowl of herbs down and begins cleaning the wound on my face. She’s more careful with this one, dabbing slowly. If it didn’t hurt so blooming much, I might actually enjoy it.

“And you’re a pain when you’re feeling weak,” she retorts, though there’s no acid in the words. “Why did you come in here when the drapes were open? Did you not see them?”

I watch her work, the way the green in her eyes seems almost hazel here in the shadows. Her skin is smooth and bright, contrasting against her freckles. Once again, I’m struck with the realization that she almost looks pretty.

For a second, I wonder if the curse is fading, but then I remember my newly earned lacerations—evidence that the curse is as strong as ever.

*Then why has she changed?* When she first arrived, she was as unattractive as a person could be, her features strangely disproportionate

to her face. But over the weeks, she's gone from ugly to plain to almost pretty. *But the only thing that's changed since she first arrived is our relationship—Oh.*

*That's* why Mildred never looked different to me even after the curse began, while the other women in the manor appeared somewhat hazy the way Stella does now. *Because I'd known Mildred for years and already cared for her when I was first cursed.*

I've known for a while now that my feelings toward Stella were growing warmer, but it's strange to think of them so matter-of-factly. *I care for her.* And apparently the curse cares that I care.

"Alistair," she repeats, looking concerned by my silence. "Why did you come in here with the windows open? Are you feeling alright?"

"I was distracted," I whisper, still mooning over her.

Stella freezes, her hands soft as they go still on my face. I watch her lips part, a mingling of surprise, confusion, and—dare I say—hope swirling on her face.

"I didn't think anything could distract you," she says quietly.

"I didn't either. But I think you enjoy proving me wrong. You've done so with all my other assumptions."

"Like what?"

I reach out, rubbing the tail of her braid between my fingers. It's softer than it looks, and I have half a mind to tear the ribbon off and let the whole mass come tumbling free.

"Like the fact that you're not ugly. Or that people *can* change. That I can change."

Her hand cups the uninjured side of my face, bringing my gaze back to her. "You didn't need to change, Al. You just needed to shed the façade

that we both know wasn’t the real you anyway.”

“Shed like a snake,” I smile.

“Mhm. Maybe I should start calling *you* Slither.”

“Do you mind that I give you nicknames inspired by animals?”

She reaches for the bandages. “No. Because I know they’re not insults. At least not anymore.”

I wince as she presses a fresh bandage to the wound on my face.

“Of course they’re not insults,” I say incredulously. Is that what she’s thought this whole time? “I call you Lioness, Little Wolf, Slither and all the rest because even from the beginning, I’ve known that you’re just as strong as they are. Possibly stronger. You’re clever and stubborn and determined and nurturing and fearless like they are. How could I compare you to anything but a majestic beast who’s at the top of the food chain?”

She’s quiet for a moment, sitting back on her heels to study me. There’s a glimpse of deeper emotion in her eyes, and I think she might let herself cry if she wasn’t so shocked.

“You really think those things about me?” she asks. I brace myself, knowing that this question is important. The way I answer it will determine the trajectory of our relationship.

And I really want it to go forward.

“That and more, Little Wolf.”

She looks down at her hands, wiping the remains of Brutus’ poultice from her fingers.

“When you first called me that, I hated it,” she explains. “Someone I know calls me that. He always say things like ‘run, Little Wolf, it’s all you know how to do.' Or when he’s angry, he says ‘you’re a packless little wolf, don’t be a dead one’. So I guess I resented the name.”

My fists tighten as she speaks of this vile man, and I imagine myself ripping the nose from his face and watching him choke on it. It would be a drop in the bucket toward the suffering he deserves for saying such things to her. And given the words, I imagine he did more than say cruel things.

“I’ll kill him,” I growl, my fingernails digging into my palms, my wounds forgotten in the face of my rage. “Give me his name and he’s dead.”

A smile tilts Stella’s lips and she grabs my fist, smoothing my fingers until they relax. “Thank you for caring.”

“Of course I care. And if me calling you Little Wolf upsets you, I’ll never say it again.”

Her forehead wrinkles in thought. “Why Little Wolf? What made you compare me to a wolf?”

I shrug. “Easy. Wolves are strong. Even if they're cut off from the pack, they survive. They’re also nurturing and clever, stubborn and resourceful, and they look after their own. Pack is family—they’re loyal until the end. From the beginning, I knew that anyone in your pack would be defended with the same ferocity that you defended yourself. I admired it. Still do.”

She’s quiet for a few moments and I begin to worry that I’ve unintentionally offended her. *Maybe comparing a woman to an animal isn’t quite the compliment I intended it to be.*

But then her expression warms, and she squeezes my hand. “Say it again.”

“Say what?”

“Call me…that.”

My pulse thrums fast, matching the beat of my wonderstruck heart. Careful not to scare her away, I slowly flip my hand and wrap my fingers

around hers. “You won’t be trapped forever, Little Wolf.”

This time, the tears break through her resolve and build in her eyes as she smiles. Thankful that we’re free of prying eyes and a sidebar commentary, I pull Stella into my arms.

She hugs me back without hesitation, hiding her face in my neck. I feel her tears trickle down my shirt, but I don’t mind.

*I don’t mind at all*. I feel like a king, greater than Orrin or even my father. Holding Stella as she cries is the richest I’ve ever been.

To hold someone’s vulnerability, to protect it from the world for her, feels like the most powerful, important job anyone could have.

It’s one I’m realizing I don’t want to give up.

We stay there in the kitchen for a while, silently holding each other’s emotions in this small safe haven. The artifact we were going to search the manor for is completely forgotten and I don’t care if we ever get around to looking for it. When Stella rests beside me, her head on my shoulder, I study her face.

In the last few minutes, she’s gone from forgettable to beautiful. Before, everything was dark, but now I see daylight when I look at her. *And I think I know what that means.*

# Chapter 23

## Stella

### oH no

I watch Alistair from across the dining table. He's focused on his food at the moment, but every time he glances up at me, his look becomes tender, and he smiles this small private smile that makes my insides dance.

In the last few weeks, we've moved from the far ends of the table to instead sit on the long sides, so the distance between us is rather short. It seemed practical when we started doing it. How were we supposed to converse across the length of a long table without shouting?

*I think it was safer to shout.* Having Alistair close is always distracting these days.

"So, the scissors were a dead end," I say, turning my eyes to my soup. Anything to keep him from seeing the blush on my cheeks.

"It was a shot in the dark to begin with," Alistair sighs. "The scissors were lost six hundred miles from here two hundred years ago in a place that I'm certain my brother has never been to. The chances of them finding

their way into the manor were slim at best. I'm just beginning to wonder if the Poet I hired lied to me."

"You mean you don't think there's an artifact that can get around the curse?"

"At least not one that's in the manor like he promised."

Suddenly my thoughts fly to the quill I have hidden in my room. It's been weeks since it even crossed my mind. I've been so preoccupied with Alistair and the curse that I completely forgot about it. But if the Poet said that the artifact was inside the manor…maybe he meant the artifact that I brought. *But how could he know that the quill would end up here?*

He can't possibly have meant the quill. Poets don't have the gift of prescience. *That we know of…*

What if the quill is the artifact that Alistair has been looking for? What if I can free him?

I want freedom for my friends, but will freedom mean losing Alistair? Will he want to go back to Roburry once he's no longer cursed? Will he run? Because running is my only option.

And I don't want to run alone.

"Stella?"

I look up as Alistair says my name for probably the third time.

"Are you alright?" he asks. The concern on his face cuts me deep. Will this look last? Or will it fade once he's found freedom?

"Yes, I'm fine," I smile. The expression doesn't meet my eyes.

Alistair must notice because he sets down his spoon and watches me carefully. He looks more handsome now than he did when I met him, though I know it's not possible. His eyes are still a calming green, his hair still floating so effortlessly to his chin.

I haven’t really touched his hair yet—not the way I want to. But I’ve been thinking about it more and more.

There’s something about him that’s different lately. Something deep and resonating. It calls out to me, and I feel like a butterfly drawn to the pollen of a flower that could be a poison or a remedy.

“You know that you’re safe here, right?” he asks.

I blink, trying to understand where the comment came from. “What?”

“The other day you said that ‘he’ used to say horrible things to you.” His faces hardens. “It sounded like he owned you, Freckles.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Stella—”

I scoot out my chair and stand, my defenses rising high. “Goodnight. I don’t think I’ll be coming to the library later.”

I only make it two paces before Alistair has rounded the table and grabbed hold of my wrist. I don’t meet his eyes, but I can feel them boring into me, begging me to crack open doors and let him see me. All of me.

“I want to protect you, Tigress,” he pleads quietly.

I look up, glaring at the tenderness in his voice, fear turning to panic in my chest. “I don’t need you to protect me. I’ve been doing it myself for a long time.”

“You think I don’t know that?” he demands, eyes narrowed. “Tell me, were you there the other day in the kitchen when I explained why I give you animal nicknames? Do you remember what I said? Here, I’ll remind you.” His tone isn’t unkind, but it’s immovable as stone. “I told you that you’re just as strong as a tiger or a lion or a wolf. I’m very aware that you can protect yourself. But you’re not packless anymore, Stella.”

I try to pull my wrist from his grasp, my self-preservation insisting that I shut down this moment of vulnerability before it can be used against me. “I don’t need a pack.”

“Yes, you do,” Alistair snaps, moving his hands to my face. They’re so gentle, so cautious on my skin that I nearly cry at the tenderness of it. “And I want to be in your pack. I want us to look out for each other. To always back each other up. But I can’t do it successfully if I don’t know what’s going on. I’m not asking you to tell me every detail right now. Just please tell me why you were running when we met. Let me be on your side.”

My lips part, but no sound comes out. He has no idea what he’s asking for. Telling him that I’m an indentured spy bound by a magical artifact is one thing, but to admit that I’m bound to his brother is a whole other ordeal.

I don’t believe that Alistair would hand me over to Orrin, but I don’t want to hurt him by destroying the hope I know he holds onto for Orrin’s sake.

“Please,” he begs.

And like a dried-up riverbed, I crack. “I’m bound to him by a magical artifact. For all intents and purposes, he does own me. I steal for him; plant lies for him. And if he finds me, I won’t have a choice but to go back.”

I watch Alistair’s face, waiting for him to be disgusted by my past behavior or to say that my problem doesn’t belong to him. It’s a cruel thing to think about someone who’s proven himself faithful, but old habits die screaming, and my trust is so bruised that it’s always ready to run at the first sign of treachery.

After a moment, his expression becomes controlled and almost eerily calm. His thumbs skim across my cheeks and I feel myself shiver despite my best efforts to appear unaffected.

“No one owns you,” he says, and his voice is so steady that at first, I think he doesn’t care. But then I hear the tremble in his voice and realize that he’s holding back for my benefit.

If I weren’t here, our dinner would be smashed on the floor in the wake of his anger, and he would be plotting the death of the man that he doesn’t know is his brother.

“Do you understand me?” he goes on. “No one owns you. From here on out you’re free to decide your future for yourself.”

“You can’t promise that—”

“I can,” he whispers, pressing his forehead against mine. My whole body goes still as it reacts to him, my skin hot and my heart stuttering like it’s a flame about to go out.

I close my eyes, basking in the feeling of him being so close. His nose skims mine and I feel his breath on my lips. Everything in me screams to latch onto him. To meld myself to him and never let go.

*I’m falling in love.* My eyes open and my breathing stops. *Oh no,* I’m falling in love.

Alistair must sense my hesitation because he pulls back, looking down at me with a worried look in his eyes. “Is everything okay?”

“I…no.”

And then I flee like the coward I am.

My steps echo on the marble floors, and I hear Alistair shouting after me. His fingers graze my arm and I spin around, stepping back out of his

reach. Tears fall from my eyes, mocking my desire for privacy and instead flaunting my feelings.

Alistair's gaze lands on them and his mouth opens, panic in his eyes. "Stella—"

"No, don't." I point at him, keeping an arm's length between us. "Don't come closer."

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"You don't know that."

His face falls and his shoulders droop. "You still don't trust me."

I shrug, knowing it's pointless to pretend that he's wrong. "I can't help it. Once a survivor, always a survivor. I don't know any other way to live."

He takes a deep breath and in one stride closes the gap between us, careful not to touch me. "But you're not living, Stella. You're clawing for breath, always looking for the exit. That's not living."

"And what am I supposed to do? Roll over and give you everything?"

"The reason I want everything is because I want to *give you everything.*"

I want to believe him, but panic has seized control of my mind and all I can hear is the constant chant in my head: oh no, I'm falling in love.

Love is strength; I know because loving me made my mother strong. But love is also weakness when it's only a phantom love for the wrong person. It killed my mother. It betrayed me. It betrayed Alistair when his brother murdered his father. *I can't be trusted to know if this is real.*

"You can't give me everything Alistair. I don't know how to accept it."

Without waiting for a response, I run for my room. The fear doesn't subside until the door is shut behind me, and even then, I feel like the oak panel is the only thing holding me up. Sobs wrack my body and I press a hand to my mouth to quiet my whimpers.

“Miss Stella?” Milly walks around the corner, a load of laundry in her arms. When she sees my tear-streaked face, she tosses the bundle to the sofa and runs over to me. “Sweet girl, are you hurt?”

I shake my head against her shoulder as she holds me. “I’m an idiot.”

“Sh, it’s okay.”

“It’s not though. I ran again. I always run. Even from the good things.”

I’ve never hated myself more.

# Chapter 24

## Alistair

### haunTed by the look in my eyes

Pages and pages of research lay scattered across the table. There's more stacked in the corner, all of it an opus to breaking the curse.

Narcissus sits atop my scribbles, scratching at a page. Normally I would scold him, but today I don't.

"Good boy," I murmur, petting his back. He meows and arches under my hand, nuzzling his head against my arm.

He watches with more interest than normal as I round up four years' worth of research. Even before I hired the Poet to help me, I spent hours in this room looking for a loophole to the curse or some kind of clue about how to break it.

It all seems like such wasted effort now.

I stuff as many books and notes in my arms as I can and turn to see Milly standing in the doorway. "What are you doing?" she asks, squinting at my heavy load.

"Changing my focus," I sigh, stuffing all my research into a cupboard in the corner. It takes me multiple trips to manage it all, and I have to force

the door closed, but it fits. “My priorities were wrong.”

“I’ll say,” she sasses, crossing her arms and stepping further into the room.

I scowl at her. “You could at least pretend to disagree.”

She just smiles. “Where would be the fun in that? Now what change in priorities has caused you to stuff your work into a cupboard?”

“Stella. No, don’t grin at me,” I say, pointing at her. “It’s not like that. She just showed me how selfish I was being. All these years spent researching a way around the curse and the only reason I did it was for me.” I busy myself gathering books from the table, avoiding the disappointment I know is on her face. “I wasn’t thinking of you or Brutus or Maddy or David. I thought only of me and my desire to return to Roburry for revenge.”

I move about the room, placing books back on the shelves so I can start my new project with a clean slate. Milly’s eyes bore into my back as I work, and I try to shake the intense guilt plaguing my heels.

“And what now?” she asks after a moment, her tone curious.

“Now…I suppose I’m being selfish again.” My arm falls to my side, a book clutched in my fingers as I realize that my decision isn’t as simple as I thought. It affects more than just me. “I didn’t even consider all of you when I decided this.”

“Decided what?”

“To stop looking for a way around the curse until I find a way to free Stella from the man who has her trapped by a magical artifact.”

A pride-filled smile shines on Mildred’s aged face and her eyes glisten with tears. She steps close, putting a hand to my cheek.

Hers is a face I know well. It's one that's seen me steal cakes from the kitchen at the castle, play pranks on my mother, fight with my brother, and mourn my father.

But the way she looks at me now, I feel like a new man. A good man.

"My dear boy, I have never been so proud," Milly says softly, grinning.

"Yeah?"

"Of course. You're putting her above yourself."

"But I didn't consider any of you," I argue.

She rolls her eyes. "Alistair, do you really think that any of us are willing to let Stella go back to whatever master is responsible for making her so afraid? Not a chance," she scoffs. "I'd be disappointed in you if you didn't do this for her."

I chuckle, stuffing the book on its shelf. "Of course you would. Now if only Stella was as open to the idea as you. She's not speaking to me right now."

Milly nods, unsurprised, and I wonder what Stella has told her about the situation. "She's scared," the housekeeper says as I walk around returning books. "I'm not even sure she understands it herself."

"She told me as much," I sigh, remembering the heartbreaking look on her face when she told me that she didn't know how to accept all that I wanted to give her. It was like she was haunted by the look in my eyes, terrified of being loved.

But if there's one thing Stella has taught me in the weeks since she arrived, it's that we're all capable of growth. And I'm too stubborn to quit on her now.

"She just needs to shed her old skin," I say more to myself than to Mildred.

“And who better to teach her that than someone who’s recently learned it himself?” Milly smiles, setting a hand on my shoulder.

Overcome with emotion, I set the rest of the books down and wrap her in a hug. She has a tight grip for such a slight woman, hugging me like her life depends on it.

“I don’t think I ever said thank you for the risks you took for me,” I sputter, my lips trembling as tears fight their way free.

“It was not a risk to choose you, Alistair. It was a privilege.”

Her words only make me cry harder and I cling to her, thankful that if my mother can’t be here, at least I have Milly.

“Thank you for everything,” I sniff. “For staying with me when you didn’t have to. For sticking by me when I wasn’t worth sticking with. I wouldn’t be here now if it weren’t for you.”

She leans back, looking at me with a mother’s love, unwavering. “You would have figured it out on your own if you had to. But I’m happy that I got to be here to see you grow. Now you just need to help Stella the way she’s helped you.”

I nod, already planning it in my head. Stella will run at the first sign of a fight. *Which is why I can’t let her see me coming.*

# Chapter 25

## Stella

even if it's handcuffed,
i'm leaving here with you

My fingers move the paintbrush with rushed strokes, as if my life depends on the paint in my hands. Each swipe feels like the ticking of a clock, and with each tick, I paint faster.

I haven't slept much in the last two days and dinner with Alistair has been unbearable. Every evening, I can feel him watching me, imploring me to talk to him. But I keep my eyes on my food, refusing to give in. The worst part is that I don't really know why.

Or at least I didn't. Until now.

As I step back from the wall, studying my handiwork, I'm grieved by my own creation. When Alistair asked me to paint something honest, I started painting without fully knowing how it would turn out. And now that it's finished, I'm having a hard time facing the truth on the wall.

The painting is honest, it's me who's not.

Uncomfortable acknowledging the truth, I move over to our usual table and begin cleaning my brushes with the bowl and towel I'd set aside

earlier. Narcissus follows, hopping up and knocking over one of Alistair's quills.

The table is cleaner than normal, but part of me wonders if it's because Alistair has decided to continue his search alone. I couldn't blame him if he did. I ran away the moment he showed me any vulnerability. *I wouldn't trust me either.*

"I didn't expect to see you." Startled, I turn to see Alistair standing in the doorway, his eyes scanning me desperately. My body screams at me to run to him, but I'm not sure if he would welcome it or not.

"Couldn't sleep," I explain lamely, aware that I'm a mess with half of my hair falling out of its braid and dried paint on my cheeks.

"Me neither." He smiles sadly. "I see Narcissus is keeping you company."

The cat meows at him and Alistair comes forward, scratching Narcissus on the top of the head. Narcissus purrs at the attention and Alistair looks at me with wide eyes.

"Did you hear that?" he asks, smiling. "He just purred."

"What's gotten into you, little man?" I croon. "Are you done being hot and cold with your master now?"

Narcissus keeps purring, standing and rubbing himself against my arm while Alistair continues to scratch his head. "I'll take that as a yes," Al says, cocking his eyebrow. "I don't know what I did to get in your good graces, but I'm not about to look a gift horse in the mouth."

The cat hisses and swipes a paw at Alistair. "Ow! What was that for?"

"I don't think he likes being compared to a horse," I shrug, barely holding back a smile.

“Is that funny to you?” Alistair demands, smiling. Then he picks up a dirty brush and plops a bit of paint on my chin. “How about that—is that funny?”

My jaw drops and I grab a brush of my own, dabbing green paint on his cheek. A spark lights in his eyes and he picks up a brush covered in blue paint.

He darts toward my cheek with the brush raised, but I dodge out of the way. I make it halfway around the table before he snatches hold of my arm and maneuvers the paint onto my skin.

I reward him with a bit of red paint on his chin, and he retaliates with yellow on my forehead. We chase each other around the room for a few minutes, wielding paintbrushes like swords. After a while, our faces are dotted with paint smudges, bright and messy.

“I surrender,” I finally gasp, holding my brush up in a truce. “No more paint.”

Alistair squints at me, but the playful scrutiny on his face morphs into shock when his eyes drift to the completed mural behind me.

Suddenly self-conscious, I step back, seeking refuge behind the sofa. Alistair moves almost unconsciously closer, tossing his brush on the table without looking at it. His eyes rove desperately over the mural, his face not giving anything away and therefore magnifying my anxiety.

Unsure what he’s thinking, I turn and look at the wall too. On the left side is a handsome portrait of Alistair from the shoulders up. There’s an arrogance in his smirk, he looks selfish and thoughtless, the way he was when I first met him.

On the right side of the wall is a self-portrait of me, my eyes hollow with fear and my expression set in stubbornness. It grieves me to see my own

face look so lost and lonely. *And afraid.*

What angers me though is that I've seen that look in the mirror. Recently.

When I put it on the wall, I thought of it as metaphor for all the cages I've lived in—my past life. But when I completed the mural earlier and studied my self-portrait, I realized that I can no longer claim that Orrin and Paul were the only ones who caged me.

Because I've caged myself. That lonely, sad look on my face still exists and it's of my own making.

My eyes drift to the tall pine trees that reach between our portraits, books floating through the air as if flying and a lake shimmering off in the distance. There's even a little orange tabby cat reclining on a book as it soars through the trees.

And in the middle of the wall, above the fireplace, is another portrait of Alistair and me. This time, we're looking at each other. His arms are around me and my hands rest against his chest as we stare at one another. There's joy shining in my eyes and wild affection in his.

It hurts to see how easy it would be for me to be happy. Just one sentence to Alistair, and this cage of mine could be unlocked. But I still hesitate.

In seven years of cages and masters, my only constant has been what control I could find over my emotions. I couldn't control my surroundings or what happened to me, but if I kept moving, kept running, I could control myself. *At least I used to.*

Since Alistair, my usual practices have felt all but useless. There was a time when all I wanted was to be free of Orrin—free and alone. The idea of spending my life on the run didn't scare me because if I was busy running, I wouldn't have time to think about my pain. But now that I've

met Alistair and Milly and Brutus, I don't think a life of running is going to be enough for me.

And that's all I see when I look at this mural. *I wonder if Alistair sees it too.*

He seems stuck on the middle part of the painting, studying the way our portraits hold each other. His expression is still inscrutable, but his eyes are awestruck, and I can see his fingers trembling.

Then his gaze turns to me.

Hunger takes on a whole new meaning as my entire being is consumed by the intensity of his attention. Before I can speak or so much as take a breath, he's closed the gap between us, rounding the sofa.

Though he doesn't touch me, I can feel the heat of his body. His eyes travel everywhere, my face, my hair, my hands. And every place goes warm with a burn that I'm desperate to draw out. I almost whimper at the few inches between us, but then his finger brushes against my hand.

His eyes widen at my gasp, and I love the way his lips twitch, drawing my attention.

"Don't run," he whispers, his fingers trailing up my forearm, over the inside of my elbow and up to my shoulder.

It takes me a few tries to speak, my mouth is so dry. "I won't."

His hand cups my face, his thumb skating across my cheekbone, trailing over the half-dried paint.

Feeling brave, I grab a fistful of his shirt, pulling myself closer as I revel in the feel of his strong chest under my fingers.

"Like what you feel, Tigress?" he murmurs, smirking.

"So far," I tease.

A growl rumbles through him, vibrating against my knuckles. His free hand slides around my waist and suddenly there's no space left between us. His eyes are out of focus, they're so close. Yet he's still too far away.

I'm about to voice my protest when the tip of his nose slides across my cheek, my eyes fluttering shut. He tenderly rubs his nose against mine and I lean forward, ready for the kiss of my life, but he keeps his lips just out of reach.

I'm about to complain, but then I feel a soft kiss against my cheek and I sigh contentedly. There's another gentle press, this one against my forehead as his fingers flex on my back.

And when I don't think I can take it anymore, his lips brush against mine.

It's the barest touch, not even a kiss, just a test. He does it again, there and gone. Gentle and cautious. But the third time, he stays.

I press against him, not wanting to give him any reason to leave. His hand slides back into my hair and mine splay across his chest.

His every move is so sweet that it makes my heart ache for all the tenderness I've missed out on in life. If this is what love feels like, I'm angry with everyone who ever withheld it from me. Feeling this secure, wanted, cherished, and protected must be more life sustaining than water.

I'm convinced it's all I'll ever need.

When I smile against his mouth, Alistair chuckles and pulls back just far enough to look at me. "What?"

"If I'd known that kissing you would satisfy me this much, I would have had a bite of you after dinner every night instead of scones," I tease, wrapping my arms around his neck.

His chest rumbles again and he swoops down, kissing me once, twice, three times. His touch is slow and adoring, and I can tell that he's holding back for me. Trying not to overwhelm me or scare me off.

Although I don't ever plan to run away from him again, I'm grateful for his restraint. The desire I'm feeling for him now is almost enough to make me question the sanity of being in his arms when we're alone in the dark.

But when he kisses me again, I dismiss it.

"Do you know how long I've wanted to do that?" he rasps, leaning his forehead against mine.

"About a week. You hated me before that," I quip.

His arms squeeze my sides and I laugh. He leans back, studying me with a prideful smile.

"I've never heard you laugh like that," he says, his thumbs rubbing against my spine.

"Like what?"

"Like you're happy. Really happy."

I grin and sneak in one more peck before hiding my face in the crook of his neck. "I am really happy. I think for the first time since my mother died."

He holds me tighter, sighing like he hasn't fully relaxed in a decade. "Me too." There's a pause and then, "I need to tell you something."

Worry snakes into my gut as I lift my head to look at him. "Okay."

"I want you to know that I'm not looking for a way around the curse anymore," he says, pushing a lock of hair from my face.

"What, why?"

He tilts his head as if I should know the answer. "Because, Little Wolf, you're more important. Instead of spending hours looking for a way

around the curse, we're going to spend our time looking for a way to protect you from the man who calls himself your master."

"Alistair, no." I shake my head, trying to pull away, but he refuses to release me.

"It's not up for discussion, Howler," he smiles, both dimples appearing. "I'm choosing you. And before you try to argue with me, the entire staff is on my side. We're your pack whether you like it or not, and I'm not letting you go through life in a cage—mental or physical. You deserve more."

I want to fight with him, but I'm too busy fighting off tears to bother with it. His fingers rub my back and I can't decide if I'm mad or touched.

*Both. Definitely both.*

"And if you want to leave once your three months are up," he continues softly, "I'll keep looking for a way to free you while you run. Just let me know where you are so I know you're safe, and I'll send word the moment I figure it out."

My heart squeezes at his offer of sacrifice. He cares about me enough to set aside his own goals and put my safety first. *Oh no, I'm falling in love,* the words chant in my head. But this time, they only make me smile.

"Even if it's handcuffed, I'm leaving here with you, Wilding," I insist, kissing him softly. "We're a pack now. If we run, we run together. If we fight, we fight together. Deal?"

His eyes fill with tears and he nods. "Deal."

As his tears begin to fall, I pull him close, holding him tight. He lets himself cry, clutching me to him. Moments pass as I stroke his hair, and once he's done, we collapse on the sofa, not an inch of space between us.

Narcissus sits on our laps, demanding attention as morning fades to afternoon. For hours, the three of us sit there, my feet in Alistair's lap and

his hands on my calves as we trade stories.

He tells me about his early years with Orrin, about the pranks they pulled and the innocent trouble they got into. I laugh and smile, but a part of me mourns on his behalf, wishing I could bring back the brother he knew instead of the one he has now.

I tell him about the years when my mother was alive. How she baked constantly and instigated most of the trouble the kids in the neighborhood got into. Alistair smiles, asking questions.

But fluffy memories turn into gritty ones, and we each share some of our harder moments.

I tell him about a few of my missions, keeping them vague. The family that I stole important documents from, resulting in the failure of their business and the suicide of the father. Weeks later, I snuck into the magistrate's office and planted documents that helped the son get the business back. But it didn't erase my sin.

I tell him about the first time I tried to refuse a job and Orrin had a young maid slain as punishment, and about my first escape attempt and the scar I earned on my forearm. But I never say the duke’s name or title, not wanting Alistair to feel guilty that it was his brother that did such things.

As I speak, Alistair holds my hand, squeezing it while I cry and leaning forward to kiss my forehead. But I can see the vengeance hidden in his eyes.

He means to kill my master. *But I can’t let him kill his own brother*. Orrin’s death would haunt him forever.

When it’s Alistair’s turn, he tells me about the time he campaigned for his father to continue training Orrin as his heir to the ‘family business’

instead of Alistair. Alistair had been so desperate to escape the responsibilities and expectations of being his father's heir, that he didn't care if Orrin was dangerous or not. Alistair knew that Orrin had only a week prior had a man sent on a dangerous mission as punishment for disobeying orders, from which the man never returned, his body never recovered.

Alistair hangs his head in shame as he tells me the story, but I nudge his chin up, urging him to look me in the eye. Then I kiss him and tell him that he may not be able to be proud of his past, but his present is something worth celebrating. *He* is worth celebrating.

Alistair smiles and pulls me close, Narcissus meowing a complaint at being squished between us. Though we talk for most of the night, Alistair never reveals that his brother is the duke. But I don't begrudge him for it. I think I can safely assume that he's keeping it to himself out of fear of what I'll think.

But I'm resolved now. My choice has been made and like the wild animal he compares me to, I will not leave my pack. And from here on out, my pack is Alistair Godfrey.

# Chapter 26

## Stella

### turn the lights down

"Did you already see this one from Sait Laurent about the candle stick whose flame can burn away any magic?" Al asks innocently, his eyes on his book.

I bite my lip to hold back a grin as his fingers trail up the inside of my arm.

This morning when I came into the library, I told myself that I was not going to let him be a distraction today. I should have known better.

For the last week, Alistair and I have been completely inseparable. When we're working in the library, we sit at the same table, holding hands as we banter like children. At dinner, we sit beside each other, bumping shoulders as we banter like children. And in the evenings when we sit in the library eating scones, we read and banter like children.

Basically, we canoodle and banter like children.

The staff are unbearably ecstatic over our newfound romance. They grin every time they see us together and tease us whenever we're apart. No one

has had a bad day in the manor in a week and it's all because I've decided that kissing Alistair is more fun than fighting with him.

"Stella?" Alistair says. I don't have to look at him to know he's grinning. He's always glib when he can tell that he's having an effect on me.

"Hm?" I flip a page in my book, pretending to be unbothered even as goosebumps follow the trail of his fingers on my arm.

"Did you see the part about the candlestick?" he whispers, leaning so close that his nose brushes my temple. "Or are you too obsessed with me to focus on work?"

I whip my head around to glare at him. "I am not obsess—"

He cuts the words off with a kiss and I kiss him back before shoving him back into his chair. Our smirks are mirror images of each other.

"Animal," I complain, but my blush and boomerang gaze render the word less of an insult and more an endearment.

"You're one to talk," he retorts, grinning.

"I did see the chapter about the candlestick, by the way."

"And?" He bumps my knee with his.

"And its last known location was either in Carakass—on the other side of Dunrow—or in the capital, depending on whether you believe Saint Laurent's account or his partner's."

Alistair groans, rubbing a hand across his face. "If we don't find some real answers soon, I might have to see about hiring another Poet."

"Can you even find another Poet?"

"Probably not. I was lucky enough to find the first one. And even if I do find another one, they'll probably tell me something equally vague and unhelpful."

"When you hired that poet, what exactly did they say about your curse?"

Alistair sighs and glances at the tall mirror and its reflection of the world outside. I can see him longing to *feel* the sunlight instead of just seeing it through a crack. I wish I could break his curse so he could rip up the drapes and bask in the light he's been missing. But I can't if I don't know what the curse wants.

"It doesn't matter, our priority is you," he says, avoiding my eyes.

"No," I correct him, grabbing his hand, "*Your* priority is me. My priority is you. Now will you please tell me more about the curse? I promise I'm not going to abandon our search for my freedom, but if I know more about your curse, I might be able to spot a helpful artifact or story if I see it."

He sighs and shakes his head, but I know by the look in his eyes that he won't deny me.

"Four years ago, my brother decided to have a party here at the manor," he explains, his thumb rubbing the back of my hand. "Orrin was looking for a bride that would give him the most opportunity for expansion. Someone with connections and money. He hoped that having them stay with us here would encourage an agreement to form faster than in the city where there were other men to compete with.

"But early in the night, he got into an altercation with a woman in the ballroom. When I saw the situation escalating, I did what I always did and left the room so people wouldn't associate me with my brother's behavior. So, I happened to be in the hall when the woman left the party, and I made the mistake of apologizing on Orrin's behalf.

"I'd just sent my mother away with the Baron the month before to keep her safe from Orrin. And when I saw the woman in the hall, I could hear my mother's voice in my head. 'Alistair, what kind of man are you?' That's what she always says to me when she wants me to make a better choice.

It’s incredibly manipulative, but it works." Alistair smiles, his fingers squeezing mine. "And that night it turned out to be incredibly unhelpful. When I apologized to the woman, she just stared at me for what seemed like a strangely long time. And then she cursed me.”

I turn in my seat so I’m facing him and cover our conjoined hands with my free one. “What did she say? What were her exact words?”

Alistair frowns as he closes his eyes, shaking his head. “I don’t know. Once she started speaking, there was this immense pain in my head. It was like a loud bell was chiming in my mind, off key and constantly humming. I collapsed and when I opened my eyes again, she was nodding at me.”

He looks at Narcissus, scratching the cat when he rubs against Alistair’s chest. “Milly found us first, and then Orrin came. The Poet said that I was cursed to be bound to the manor and controlled by the sun. She warned my brother that anyone still inside by daylight would be stuck here with me and then she told me that the length of my curse was dependent on me, but that there was nothing I could do to end it.

“Orrin left within the hour, along with all the other guests. A good portion of the staff left, but Milly and the others stayed for me. Then two years ago, when I went into the nearest village and told them I was looking for a Poet, one came to the manor a week later. It was a man and he told me that the curse could be ended with an artifact that would be found inside the manor.”

My shoulders go taut, and my breath catches in my throat. I'm sure he's told me this before, but after my revelation at dinner, the words hit me differently. “*Would* be found?” I ask shakily, thinking of the quill in my room. “You’re sure he said, ‘would be’?"

Alistair nods. “Positive.”

‘Would be found’ in the manor. As in, future tense. *I was right.* The Poet was talking about the quill—the artifact that I brought to the manor.

“Al…”

“What is it, Freckles?” He asks, concern marring his features as he notices my expression.

“I—”

“Miss Stella?” Christine says, walking into the room. She’s barely holding back a smile, her hands clasped behind her back. “It’s ready.”

“What’s ready?” I ask, confused.

Christine looks from me to Alistair, and then begins to sway in place. It takes me a moment to realize what she’s hinting at.

“Oh!” I stand and pull Alistair with me.

“Where are we going?” he asks as I drag him out into the hall, following Christine from the room.

“Nothing. You’ll see,” I promise him.

But he’s not so easily distracted. “Stella, our conversation isn’t over. Something’s bothering you.”

When we come to a stop before a pair of large double doors, I turn and set my hands on his shoulders. He needs to know about the quill. I know that. But once I tell him, he’s going to ask me to use it. He’s going to ask me to run.

And for just a little while, I want to pretend that this can last forever. That the duke isn’t a problem and that we’re both free.

“We’ll finish our conversation later,” I say. “But for now, I need you to close your eyes.” He tilts his head, resistant, and I give him a pleading look. “Al, please. Just one moment of curse-free, master-free fun.”

Humoring me, he gives me a quick kiss and closes his eyes. I nod at Christine and we pull the double doors open. Then I pull Alistair into the room.

He stops immediately, alarmed by the warmth bathing his skin.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, tugging on his arm. “You won’t burn. I promise.”

He’s slow to follow, but he lets me guide him forward, his face tight with fear. I squeeze his arm and lead him to the center of the room where we come to a stop.

“Open your eyes,” I say, smiling at what the staff has accomplished.

Alistair is hesitant to obey, no doubt afraid that he’ll turn to ash at any moment. It’s been four years since he’s felt the sun and not singed himself by it. But as he opens his eyes and takes in his surroundings, I see it slowly dawn on him what we’ve done.

“Turn the lights down,” I shout, and one by one, the sconces on the walls go dark, and the sunlight glows.

The manor has a small ballroom tucked on the south side of the second floor. I found it on my second day here but never had any use for it. Then, when I began thinking of ways to give Alistair a chance to see sunlight, I thought of this room.

Its walls are covered in mirrors, the trim work gilded in gold filigree. Even the ceiling is tiled in mirror plates, accented by a sparkling chandelier. The outer wall has a dozen sets of glass double doors that lead to a balcony with a stone staircase down to the lawn.

The staff and I spent half the night trying to figure out how to let enough sunlight filter through the doors without Alistair being burned by it. We eventually figured out that if we covered all but the two furthest sets of

doors, the beams that came through would reflect off the mirrors, lighting the room as if the sun itself were inside.

We timed it so that Alistair would see the room at its brightest. Beams of light bounce from the walls to the ceiling, shining on the marble floors.

"You…" Alistair's words falter, and he closes his eyes, leaning his head back. Sunlight filters across his face, illuminating it in a way I haven't seen before. The joy in his expression is so strong and blinding that I can't help but feel it too.

"You gave me back the sun," he whispers, his voice cracking with emotion.

I shrug. "It seemed only fair since you gave me my happiness back."

Eyes still closed, he snatches my waist and tugs me close, bending his head. I meet him halfway and our lips collide in a heady kiss.

He clings to me so tightly that I think I might shatter, but I don't tell him to stop. I hold him just as tight, my arms linking around his neck, pulling him close.

His lips leave mine, but just barely, our noses still touching. "I love you," he whispers.

My legs give out and my spine forgets that it's supposed to be keeping me upright. Luckily, Alistair's arms are more than capable of holding me up.

"It's okay if you don't feel it yet," he quickly reassures me, mistaking my reaction for panic. "I know this has been a lot for you and if you need more time, that's okay. I'll give you all of it."

I shake my head, sad that I clearly haven't given him the affirmation he needs in order to know how I feel. "I don't need time," I say, and then I

kiss him, threading my fingers through his hair. It's soft in my hands and I scold myself for not touching it sooner.

Alistair's hands are firm on my back, but he lets me take control of the kiss, following my lead. My movements are a little slower than his were, but my kiss is deeper, and he groans like I've unlocked a new level that he didn't know he was allowed to test with me.

"I love you," I rasp as I pull away.

He grins, his dimples deep. Completely adorable. "Say it again."

Happiness curls my toes and my smile is so big that my cheeks hurt. "I love you, Alistair."

"And I love you, Little Wolf," he breaths, pressing a kiss to my ear.

# Chapter 27

## Alistair

### i pLayed dumb

Stella has been different since yesterday. I know she's happier, and I know that it has a lot to do with me. *No, now is not the time to grin, Alistair.* I bite down on my smile, my pride deflating as I watch the pinch between Stella's eyebrows. *Something's wrong.*

I'm fairly certain that it has something to do with the man that's been treating her like a caged animal for Lord knows how long. But I meant what I said, no one will ever own her again. I don't care what I have to do to ensure it.

"You look very threatening," Stella teases, stealing a potato from my plate. "Who are you plotting to kill?"

I smile in spite of my anger. How could I not with her sitting beside me? *No one will ever own Stella again, but she certainly owns me.* And I'm not sorry for it.

"I don't need to kill anyone," I lie. She doesn't need to know about the violent things I'm planning for her *former* master. It would only worry her.

"Oh? And why's that?" she asks.

“Because, Freckles,” I smirk. “I don’t need to kill anyone. I can just sick you on them.”

As I hoped, she jabs me in the ribs, and I take the opportunity to wrap an arm around her waist. She fails in her fight against a smile, and I place a sweet kiss on her temple before letting her go back to her food.

The fact that she doesn’t seem eager to leave my touch is a boost to my male ego.

“I was thinking that we should move the table and books from the library to the ballroom,” she says, taking a sip of her water. “That way you can enjoy the sunlight while we work.”

I still can’t believe what she and the staff accomplished. To some, it may not seem like much to cover a few glass doors, but it means everything to me.

I hadn’t felt sunlight in four years without being burned by it. And while the feeling of reflected sunlight is nothing compared to the real thing, it gave me a joy I didn’t know I’d lost.

“You wouldn’t mind carrying all those books?” I ask, still bemused by how beautiful she’s become. I know it’s not new—she’s always been beautiful. But I’m seeing it for the first time, finally smart enough to know real beauty when I see it.

“Who says I’d be carrying them?” She smirks and I kiss the tip of her nose.

“You know, you lied to me,” I say, leaning back in my chair.

She goes strangely still. “What do you mean?”

Surprised by her reaction, I study her face. “You told me that you were plain looking,” I explain, noticing the way she relaxes. *Hm…What did she think I was talking about?*

“I didn’t want you to take an interest in me just because of how I look. So I lied.”

“Is that all you lied about?” I don’t mean to ask, but after all the ground we’ve covered, I don’t like that there are clearly still secrets between us. *Maybe you should confess yours first.*

I cringe. I still haven’t told her that Orrin is the duke. I want to, but in the last few weeks, I’ve come to the conclusion that once I’m free of the curse, I can’t just get revenge on my brother.

I have to take back my inheritance and become the duke my father always wanted. And I’m not sure that Stella will want to be my duchess.

Instead of being angry at my question, she looks serious; resigned. I hate that I said anything. I hate that she looks so hopeless. *I’m the king of hypocrites.*

I’m about to apologize for being such an idiot when Brutus comes storming into the room, Milly on his heels. They’re both red in the face and panting, and I stand from my chair on instinct, ready for battle.

“He’s here,” Brutus gasps, looking from me to Stella. “Your brother is here.”

It takes my mind three seconds to process those words. My brother—my *evil brother*—is here. It’s been two years since he last visited me. It’s not good that he’s chosen now to appear again. *I have to keep him away from Stella.*

I can only imagine what he’ll do if he finds out I’m in love with her.

“Make sure Stella’s room remains locked,” I say to Milly, throwing my napkin on my plate. “And lock the library too. We can’t risk him seeing the paintings. Keep him away from my wing of the manor and have the doors in the ballroom uncovered. Have the boys help Tilda and Denise

hang a tapestry over the mural in the hall and see to it that any trace of Stella is removed or locked away where Orrin can't find it."

"Come on," I say desperately, yanking Stella to her feet. I don't mean to be rough, and I mumble an apology, but I've never felt so much fear in all my life. Even when I had to send my mother away to keep her safe from Orrin's violent whims, I wasn't this terrified.

"Alistair," Stella pleads as I pull her to the door that connects to the kitchen. "Alistair, we'll go faster if you stop pulling."

I glance down at my grip on her arm, ashamed that I was practically dragging her. "I'm sorry, Freckles. I just…You have to understand, I can't let him find you."

She sets a hand on my face, and all at once I see the wolf. Gone is the girl who rearranges ballrooms and pets annoying cats. In her place is a fierce woman who's ready to fight tooth and nail.

I've never loved her more.

"Let's go," she says with a decisive nod.

Knowing that Orrin is probably already waiting in the foyer, I quickly lead the way out to the hall, nearly running as we make our way to my wing of the manor. As we make our way up stairs and down hallways, I just keep imagining the look on my brother's face if he ever finds Stella.

He won't grin, he's not that theatrical. No, Orrin's eyes will sharpen and he'll give me the smallest of smiles, silently telling me that he's won. That this leverage is all he needs to make me a willing soldier, an obedient puppet. But as we arrive at my room, I promise myself that Stella will be free.

No matter what.

I don’t stop moving even after the bedroom door is closed, making sure both the door to my sitting room and the bedroom are locked behind us.

“Alistair,” Stella begins reassuringly, but I shake my head.

“He can’t find you, Stella. You don’t know my brother. He will see you as a weakness and he will exploit you any way he can. I don’t have the manpower here to fight him off.”

“You don’t understand,” she insists, taking my hands, “I have to tell you something. There are things I haven’t explained yet.”

“Tell me when I come back.”

“But I’ve kept secrets, Al—”

I pull her close and kiss her hard. “I’ve kept secrets too. But this love is tough enough to handle it. So, let me go see why my brother is here and when I come back, we can tell each other everything. Okay?”

She looks unsure and I expect her to argue, but she kisses me instead. “Okay. Just be safe. I don’t want to lose you to him.”

I smile, taking the knife from my bedside table and slipping it into my boot. “Why Kitty Cat, I’m hurt that you think I would be so easily defeated.”

“Just come back,” she says with a glare.

I wink for her benefit, unlocking the door. “Don’t open this for anyone but me or Milly, okay? I’ll be back within the hour. I promise.”

And then, even though I feel part of myself detaching to stay with her, I leave.

***

My brother is waiting in the foyer when I arrive, and I don’t bother pretending that I’m happy to see him. His expression lifts at the glower on

my face, probably pleased to have surprised me with his arrival. There are four guards standing by the door and I hate the curse for allowing him to bring company through my gates.

“What do you want, Orrin?” I drawl lazily, getting to the point.

“Is that any way to greet your brother?” he says, lips twitching in a small smile as he opens his arms like I would actually embrace him.

“Am I supposed to hug you now?” I mock, crossing my arms.

“We are brothers,” he says, his voice deep and threatening.

I stare him down, searching for the boy I grew up with. His face, his posture and his clothes all reflect a man of greed and power. Something Father always abhorred. But his eyes reflect a watered-down cruelty. He’s an overall counterfeit version of my brother.

“Are we?” I ask, my concern for Stella and the staff greater than my own sorrow for the brother I’ve clearly lost.

I catch the barest hint of anger in Orrin’s eyes and tell myself to go easy on the insults. I want him gone, not angry.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, brother,” he hums, straightening his black shirt, trimmed with gold, “But you don’t seem happy to see me.”

“You thought that I would be happy to see the man that left me here to rot alone for four years?” I say scornfully, remembering how quickly he fled back to the castle when the Poet informed him that anyone still here by daybreak would be stuck in the curse.

Orrin rolls his blue eyes. “You’re not alone. You have your staff.”

“All of whom *chose* to stay with me, unlike you who fled not an hour after I was cursed.”

“Details,” he shrugs, waving a hand.

I shake my head as I study him, looking for signs of the boy I used to know. I can't blame him for becoming cruel. It wasn't that long ago that I wasn't so kind myself.

But I've also never killed anyone for my own gain. I mourned Leeta's life and I send her brothers money every month to assuage my guilt. It doesn't make things better, but at least I feel guilt. Orrin does not.

Four years ago, I played dumb, pretending to be blind to my brother's behavior. But I knew what he was doing, and I let him get away with it. *I won't let him do to Stella what he did to Father.*

"What are you doing here, Orrin?" I ask, nerves twisting in my stomach as I think of all the people I'm responsible for. All the people he could hurt. "It's been two years since you last visited me and that was only because you needed a place to stay on your way back to Roburry."

His blue gaze turns assessing, but I refuse to fidget. Let him scrutinize me, I won't give him a reason to suspect my feelings for Stella.

For being brothers, there's very little about us that looks alike. He got mother's eyes and father's dark waves while I got just the opposite, claiming father's green eyes and mother's light hair. Even our features are different—his more angular and sharp. The one thing we used to have in common was our smiles. But he so rarely uses his anymore unless it's to gloat.

"I'm looking for something of mine," he says, measuring my response with a calculating look in his eyes. "An indentured servant. She escaped two months ago and she's highly dangerous."

*No. There's no way.* But I feel my blood turn cold, and my heart begins to pound.

"Her name is Stella."

# Chapter 28

## Stella

### no one heard

Alistair promised that he would be back within the hour. It’s only been half that, and I’ve been pacing the whole time. But I can’t help my anxiety.

Alistair knows that his brother is an untrustworthy man, but he doesn’t know everything Orrin has done. He doesn’t know that the man who threatened me with the deaths of maids, the man who used me like a blade and punished me when I rusted, is the same man that he calls family.

But I’m not afraid of Orrin outing me as his pet. I’m afraid that he'll hurt Alistair.

And thanks to Orrin's ring, I won't be able to stop him. The ring is half of a pair, but Orrin only has the one. It allows him to bind himself to one person, preventing that person from opposing him. But once someone is out of range of the ring’s magical influence, the magic fades and their choices are once again their own. Hence my multiple escape attempts.

It was this fact that Orrin complained about most often.

There’s a knock on the door and I spin, ready to pounce, my knife already drawn.

“It’s me,” Alistair’s muffled voice says. “Don’t attack, okay?”

Relieved, I stow my knife and open the door. He’s barely shut it behind him when I launch into his arms, holding on like he might evaporate if I let go.

He holds me close, burying his face in my hair. I breathe him in, wishing I’d thought to write everything down—how he smells, how he tastes, what he sounds like. I’m afraid written words might be all we have by the time this all ends.

“I’m okay,” he assures me, running his hand down the length of my hair. “He didn’t hurt me.”

“Alistair,” I begin, pulling back so I can look at his face. But I freeze when I see his expression. “You know.”

He nods, not letting an inch of space come between us. “He’s looking for you.”

It’s not a surprise, but I sag a little anyway. I knew Orrin would come, but I expected him to keep my identity secret so he could search the manor for me when Alistair wouldn’t notice.

I should have known better. Orrin is smart, he knows that I can’t leave. He doesn’t need to chase me down this time. He just has to find me.

“I told him that I’ve been free of women for two days and am not interested in dealing with another one,” Alistair says confidently. “I don’t think he fully believes me, but he thinks that I’m still just as self-obsessed as he is. He doesn’t know what I’m willing to do for you.”

“Even though I lied?” I drop my gaze from the unconditional forgiveness in his eyes.

He tips my chin up, gentle but insistent. “You were protecting yourself, and I suspect you were protecting me. How could I be upset about that?”

“But you’re not mad that I kept secrets from you?”

“I’m mad that my brother is responsible for your pain,” he growls, leading us to the sofa where he sits beside me. I bring my knees up to my chest, managing a small smile when he grabs my hand. “I’m mad that he’s gotten away with it for so long and I’m mad at myself for letting him get away with these behaviors when I could have stopped him.”

“Your brother killed your father. What makes you think he wasn’t prepared to kill you if you got in his way?”

He doesn’t have a response for that.

“Al, because of what you *didn’t* do, I had somewhere to run to,” I argue, squeezing his hand. “If you had stayed at the castle and tried to take over like your father wanted, you would be dead. Your mother probably would be too, and I still would have ended up as Orrin’s pet. What’s worse is that I wouldn’t have been able to find safety here because *you* wouldn’t be here.

"I know you’re not proud of your past choices—and I love you for that—but sometimes our mistakes have positive consequences that we can’t always foresee. You regret letting him get away with the things he did, but I think if you’d been this man then, you wouldn’t have opposed him. Not without allies and a plan. Because you know just as well as I do that if you’re going to take down the duke, you better not miss.”

Alistair sighs dramatically, pressing his forehead to mine. “I hate it when you’re right.”

“You must be filled with hate all the time then.”

He smiles and kisses my cheek, but I can't quite return the expression. There's just one more secret I need to stop carrying.

"I want to tell you why Orrin chose me," I say, steeling myself to endure the shame that the story brings me. "I've never actually said it out loud before, but it's something that I need you to know."

Al shifts on the couch, turning so he can face me. "I'm listening."

I take a deep breath, telling myself I won't cry. But I know I will.

"When I was eight, my father died. He got sick one winter and just never recovered. It hit my mother hard. He was a good man, always humoring her whims and calling her his troublemaker." The smile slides off my face as I think of my mother's second husband.

"My mother married Paul when I was fourteen. I remember hating him the first time I met him. He had a greedy look about him, like everything and everyone could be summed up by their worth in gold coins. My mother was beautiful and according to Paul, that made her worth a lot. Looking back, I understand why my mother let him sweep her off her feet. He was charismatic and charming, and she couldn't see the signs. But I could."

The day everything changed comes back to me in a flood and I'm overwhelmed by the memories. Smoke, blood, pain, shame. They all flow through me in a rush and I take a deep breath to calm myself. Alistair squeezes my hands, but I don't look at him. I can't.

Not for this.

"You can go as slow as you need to, Stella," he whispers. "I'm not going anywhere."

I nod and wait for the emotion to settle enough that I can speak without blubbering.

“Mother died two years later in an accident,” I go on, swallowing back my tears. “A horse and cart were out of control and the injuries she sustained from the crash were too severe. She died before I could even say goodbye…and then I was left with Paul. In the eyes of the law, he was my legal guardian. Something that he loved to remind me of.

“He was a tyrant, treating me like his little slave. I cooked, I cleaned, and I even got a job washing clothes in town to support his habits. We shouldn’t have needed the money—Paul was a guard at the castle. But he wanted to live above our means.” I shake my head. Nothing was ever enough for Paul, and he didn’t care what it took to elevate himself. “I tried to run away a few times, tried to warn the town who he was, but no one heard. All they saw was a widower trying to care for his deceased wife’s wild child. They took me back every time.”

I used to hate them for it. How could they return me to a man who treated me like a dog? But now I understand. I’ve been the liar that everyone believes is innocent. I know how easy it is to fool someone. *They didn’t know better.*

“One night he didn’t come home,” I explain, recalling it in clear detail. “I wouldn’t have minded if he got himself killed in a bar fight, but his drinking always led to my strife instead of his when he promised things we didn’t have. So, I went looking for him. He was in a tavern, talking about my mother…" I swallow, trying to talk past the fury. "He was telling a group of men what it had been like to bed her.”

Alistair’s hands squeeze mine tightly and rage settles over his face.

“I don’t even remember walking home,” I grind out, my face hot with the anger I still feel three years later. “I don’t remember waiting for him. But I do remember him stumbling through the door, completely inebriated.

I remember calling him out for the things he said about my mother…and I remember how he hit me." I can still feel the sting. I was shocked—I'd never been hit before. I'm even angrier now on my own behalf than I was then.

"He gave me a bloody lip and two black eyes and then told me not to leave the house until they'd healed. He started to stumble away, but I was so angry…" I shake my head, remembering the burning rage that had lit me from the inside. It felt like my body was on fire, and if I didn't move, I was going to explode.

"I grabbed a knife from the table and ran at him." I pause, staring at Alistair and my conjoined hands. I don't want to see his face when he hears this part. "I stabbed him in the gut. He wasn't ready for it. He hit the floor hard, and I left him there, bleeding out. It took hours for him to die, more than enough time for me to get help, but I didn't. Instead, I sat in front of the fire and listened as he gasped out insults about my mother and called me horrible names. Then, when he was finally quiet, I made my plan.

"I waited two weeks so my injuries would heal. I knew that I needed to be as inconspicuous as possible when I finally left. I pulled his body into his room to help with the stench, but I knew I didn't have the physical strength to bury him deep enough that he couldn't be found. So instead, I waited until my face was healed, and then I slathered him in animal fat and set a fire."

Images flicker behind my eyes. Paul gurgling on the floor, still so despicable even in his death that he mumbled unrepeatable things about me and my mother both. The moment when I threw up while covering him in the fat. He smelled so terrible, and I was so disgusted with myself that

even after I stumbled out of the flaming house with my pack and my cloak, I threw up again.

“I watched the fire until the house was completely ablaze,” I manage to say between choked attempts to hold back tears. “And then I fled. I made it through two towns before Orrin tracked me down. A body had been discovered in the fire, though it was too far gone to identify it. But they knew it was a man and assumed it was Paul. Since my body wasn’t recovered, Orrin suspected that I had killed Paul and run. He was right.”

Tears turn to sobs, and then the sobs are so hard that my shoulders shake.

Alistair immediately reaches forward, hiding me away in his arms. I cling to him, hating myself, hating Paul, hating Orrin and even hating my parents for leaving me even though I know they didn’t choose it.

I’m nothing but shattered glass in Alistair’s embrace. Sharp pieces of me scrape against each other and I’m afraid I’ll cut him as deeply as I’ve cut myself. But he doesn’t let go. He doesn’t tell me I should be ashamed or that I should have tried harder to get away and not killed Paul.

He just holds me, stroking my hair and murmuring that he loves me.

“I know it doesn’t ease anything,” he sniffs, and I realize that he’s crying too, “But I’m so sorry, Stella. I’m sorry that your mother couldn’t see the monster. I’m sorry that the town couldn’t see it either. I’m sorry that you had to endure him and that he disparaged your mother like that. But I’m mostly sorry that you had to carry all of that around by yourself.”

“It’s only fair,” I spit out. “I killed him. Then lied about it. I deserve to feel burdened.”

Al pushes on my shoulders until I sit back. Then he cups my face, his expression stubborn and furious. “I don’t ever want to hear you say that again. Do you understand?” he demands softly. “You were a child who was

treated like an animal. You did the best you could with the information you had at the time. You were young and scared and angry and desperate."

"But I killed him out of anger—"

"And out of love for your mother, and respect for yourself. I can't say that killing someone is ever a *good* choice, but sometimes it's the necessary one. Not all lines are clear, Stel. I don't think you have anything to feel guilty about, but I'm glad that you do. Because it means that you didn't like taking life. That you grieve the life you took and the part of yourself you gave to do it."

He leans closer, his green eyes boring into mine.

"Shame has no place with you, Stella Freemont. None." He's so certain that I start to believe him. "You are a compassionate, kind, brave person and I'm proud of who you are. If you need to be sad, be sad. If you need to be angry, be angry. But please don't give in to shame. Because it's a big fat liar."

Still crying, I nod. "Thank you." And then I collapse against him, holding him like he might be able to keep me together. "I don't know that I can fully believe that right now, but I'll try."

"You'll get there one day," he murmurs, kissing the top of my head.

"There's one other thing," I say, remembering the gold quill in my room.

"I'm ready."

"I have an artifact," I admit bluntly. Surprised, Alistair lifts his head to look at me. "Orrin sent us to find it and I stole it from Jareth when I ran away. I don't know what it does, but I know that Orrin needed it to build his empire, so it must be powerful. It's been hidden in my room since I got here, and since the Poet's words were that an artifact *would* be found in the manor—"

“You think the artifact you stole is what we need to get around the curse?” Alistair asks thoughtfully.

I shrug. “It’s worth a try. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about it sooner. I honestly forgot about it until you told me what the Poet said, but then when I realized it might break the curse, I got scared that if you were able to leave…you wouldn’t want to deal with me. I just wanted a few more days with you.”

Genuine shock comes over Alistair’s face and he laughs. *Laughs.*

“Don’t mock me,” I snap, smacking his shoulder.

He kisses me, smiling. “I’m not. I just can’t imagine how you could believe that I wouldn’t want you. Slither, I’m willing to remain cursed until I die if it means I get to keep you. I love you, you beautiful idiot.”

Now it’s my turn to smile. “Call me an idiot again and I won’t share my artifact with you.”

“But I want to share all your artifacts,” he purrs, kissing my ear. “Right after you agree to marry me.”

I pull back, staring at him, wide-eyed. “Are you serious?”

He tucks my hair behind my ear, his look gentle and adoring. “I’m completely serious. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. Wedded bliss and all that.”

I bite back a grin, but the anxiety caused by Orrin's arrival keeps me from celebrating. “Ask me again after we take care of your brother.”

Alistair's expression sobers and he pulls me into his embrace. "We will take care of him, Little Wolf. And I will ask you to marry me. I promise."

But right now, even something as strong as a vow feels fragile.

# Chapter 29

## Alistair

You should be

"Have Stella's things taken to my room while Orrin and I are at dinner," I whisper to Milly, knowing that Orrin's guards may be lurking in the hall outside the kitchen. "Take Brutus with you. I don't want the guards to give you any trouble."

Brutus, a big supporter of putting an end to my brother, nods.

Of all the staff members, I was most surprised when he decided to stay at the manor with me. But after being around him for four years, I've come to realize that he didn't choose to support *me*. He chose to support the man that he believed would make the better duke.

After hearing of my brother's exploits, I'm beginning to agree that I can't be a worse duke than Orrin.

"We'll take care of it," Brutus assures me, tossing his apron on the counter.

"And there's a gold quill hidden under a loose piece of window trim," I explain, using Stella's directions to tell them how to get it out. "Once you have it, hide it in your boot, then take everything to my room."

“Denise,” I say, turning to the maid, “I need you, Franchesca and Tilda to go to the library and hang a tapestry over Stella’s mural—use two if you have to. There are a bunch stored on the second-floor housekeeping closet. Then gather my notes and the books on my table about artifacts and take them to my room. Go ahead and take Carson with you.”

Tilda looks reluctant to take her son anywhere the guards might be, but she nods. We need Orrin gone, and the best way to do it is to make sure he doesn’t find a reason to stay.

“We’ll take care of it,” Milly assures me, squeezing my shoulder.

Then she and the others leave, and I stand there in the empty kitchen, relieved that the younger staff members are hidden away in their rooms for the moment. Things are bound to become unstable soon, and if something goes awry, I don’t want the blowback to end up on anyone but me.

*Speaking of which.* I turn toward the door to the dining room, dread building in my stomach. I have no wish to see my brother. Now or ever. After hearing what he did to Stella, I don’t care if he falls from a cliff. It would be the least he deserves.

But dealing with him is a necessary evil in keeping my loved ones safe. So, I take a deep breath and step into the dining room.

Orrin is already there, seated at the head of the table. “You’re late,” he announces, and I can tell by the set of his shoulders that he’s losing patience with me.

“My apologies,” I say sarcastically, sitting in my chair. “There are a thousand other places I would rather be, so you can imagine that I wasn’t excited to settle for dining with you.”

“Would you prefer more feminine company?” he prods, studying me like the predator he is.

I keep my expression unbothered and slightly arrogant, but I’m afraid that he sees through me. He can’t know that the reason I wanted to have dinner so early is so that Stella won’t be magically pulled to the room while Orrin is still in it.

But he knows I’m lying about something.

“Brother, any company—swine, infection, infestation—would be more welcome here than you,” I quip with a sardonic smile. I haven’t been using the expression lately, but it takes no effort to use it on him.

Orrin laughs, nodding approvingly. “This place has hardened you, Brother. You’re not quite so weak anymore. Which serves my purpose well as I have no use for weak people.”

“You have use for everyone, even if it means their death.”

“True. But your death would help me very little right now. You see, I’m planning to march on the capital in a month's time. I will take the queen’s throne and you will take my position as Duke of Roburry.”

I set down my fork, my mind spinning. I knew he had his sights set on a crown, but I didn’t realize that he was planning to move so quickly. *How am I supposed to stop him without time to prepare?* “And what will you do with the queen?”

“Marry her of course,” he says, as if it should be obvious. “Once she bears me an heir, I will be free of any rebellions as my offspring will have a legal right to the throne.”

“Then you kill her?”

He rolls his eyes and takes a bite of his steak. I hate that we’re wasting it on him. It takes me half the night to travel into town to buy meat and this cut isn’t cheap.

Part of me hopes he chokes on it.

“So dramatic, Alistair,” he sighs. “I have no reason to kill the queen unless she attempts to rebel against me. And I will only do so if absolutely necessary.”

“After she unwillingly bears you a son,” I point out.

He nods like this is common practice even though such things are illegal, punishable by death. “That girl you used to chase around—Carissa, I think—is married now, but there are other, better connected women for you to woo instead. And once you return to the castle, I anticipate quite the welcome from the women of the court.”

I don’t return his greedy look.

Annoyed by my lack of exuberance, he tosses his fork on the table and glares at me. “What do you want from me, Alistair? I’m offering you a future. Power, recognition, money.”

“I would be your puppet.”

“You would be my partner. My lieutenant. We will be the most powerful family on the continent. Except for Mother, of course,” he adds, watching me studiously. “It’s a shame she’s still hiding from me. If she had come back sooner, I wouldn’t have had to put a price on her head.”

“You ordered a hit on our mother?” I shout, standing from my seat.

Orrin laughs and puts his napkin on his plate, unconcerned with my reaction. “You of all people should know what I do with those who don’t respect me.”

“Yes,” I fume, leaning forward as I brace my hands on the table. “I know quite well how you handle obstacles. You burn their houses down and murder their young. You flog anyone who questions you, kill anyone who has what you want, and punish everyone that doesn’t wish to see you on a throne…And you killed your own father just to take his seat.”

Orrin’s face goes cold, his blue eyes filled with a deadly threat. He doesn’t move an inch, but I can see him preparing himself for a fight. *Do it, I dare you.*

“Don’t forget, little brother,” he whispers, his voice deadly, “Who was beside me the whole time. Don’t forget who watched me kill and steal and plot and lie without saying a word to stop me. Don’t forget who saw me poison our father and let me get away with it. You have a reputation too, Alistair. One I made for you. You are a beast to the people of Roburry, and I can either redeem you or destroy you with one well-placed lie.”

I want to tell him that he can do no such thing. Not without Stella. We both know that she’s the one he would use to plant the lie. The one he would force to spin a tale and tear me down.

But instead, I say nothing. Because he’s not entirely wrong.

If Stella and I overcome everything and go back to Roburry, getting the people to accept us will be an uphill battle. I’m not even sure it’s possible. But there’s only one way to find out.

“Fine,” I say, stepping back from my chair. “You have your lieutenant. March on the capital, marry the queen. I will go to Roburry and be at your disposal. But you’re forgetting about my curse.”

A wolfish smile spreads across Orrin’s face. It’s so warped and evil that it bears no resemblance to the one we used to share. “Am I?” He pulls a necklace from the pocket of his jacket, swinging it by the chain. “Or am I your guardian angel?”

He tosses the necklace to me, and I have to lean over the table to catch it. The second it touches my skin, I feel the magic lift from my body as though I’ve shed ten pounds in two seconds.

I don’t have to test it to know what it will do.

“You can walk in daylight again, Brother,” Orrin announces proudly. “Leave the manor and come home. Anyone wearing that necklace is safe from the curse. It’s over. You’re welcome.”

I don’t point out that there’s only one necklace and twelve people cursed to this manor. Orrin already knows that. He just doesn’t care.

I can’t tell if he believes me that Stella isn’t here, but part of me thinks that this is a test. He’s giving me a way out, and if I leave, Stella will be unprotected. Something that I think Orrin is counting on.

Because despite his insults and hostility, he’s afraid of what I’ll do. It’s why he’s offering me the dukedom. Orrin Godfrey is afraid of his little brother. *And you should be.*

# Chapter 30

## Stella

### when you cAn

"Well?" I ask the moment Alistair returns.

We have maybe an hour until sunset and I'm terrified for the moment that the curse starts pulling me down to the dining room.

What if Orrin suspects us and he's waiting for me? What if the ring is powerful enough to overcome the curse and Orrin forces me to leave with him?

"He wants me to go back to Roburry with him," Alistair replies, taking a bag from his wardrobe and setting it on the bed. "He wants me to be the duke while he takes over the capital."

I watch him stuff clothes and blankets into the bag, his movements harried and anxious. There's something he's not telling me.

"How can you go back when you're stuck here?" I ask, watching the way he avoids my eyes. "Alistair, what did Orrin do?"

Alistair's hands freeze on the bag, and his shoulders slump. A cold weight forms in my gut and I brace myself for bad news.

“He found a way around the curse,” he says, pinning me with a grief-stricken look. “A necklace. I don’t know how he got it and frankly I don’t want to know.”

“I'm confused. You said there's *a* necklace—as in one, but you would never leave the staff behind…” And suddenly I understand why he looks so sad. “You want me to leave?”

He turns and grasps my arms before I can bolt, his eyes pleading with me to trust him. “I suspect that Orrin thinks I’ll use the necklace and leave you behind. Then he can scoop you up without any interference from me. But he underestimates me.”

I shake my head, trying to pull free of his grasp. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Stella, please.” He lifts his hands to my face, the desperation in his eyes tugging at my pathetic heart. “He’s not going to kill me. Even if I stay, he won’t hurt me if he can’t find you. He needs me. But you can’t leave the manor for another two weeks, and if you stay, he *will* find you. Please, I need you to run.”

“*I’m not leaving you*,” I bark, enunciating every word. Then I slip out of his grasp and start unpacking the bag.

I feel him step up behind me, his breath rustling my hair. “Take the necklace and go,” he whispers. “In two weeks when your end of the curse is over and you don’t need it anymore, you can send it back. I’ll give you enough money to get a reliable courier.”

I shake my head. “You won’t use it. You wouldn’t leave the staff.”

His arms slide around my waist, his chest warm and solid against my back. I want to push him away, but I’m weak, so I don’t.

“I’m starting to think that the only way to break the curse is to find the Poet who cast it,” he says, leaning his head against mine as my hands go

still on the bag. “I’ll use the necklace and you and I can find her. Then we’ll free the staff, and this will all be over.”

“You’re forgetting our biggest issue. Your brother.”

He’s quiet and I let him think. We both know that Orrin will never let me go. So the only other way to free us from his grasp is if he dies. And I won’t let Alistair live with a choice like that.

“You let me take care of him,” he growls, his chest vibrating against me.

“What does that mean?” I ask, turning in his arms.

He looks grim, his lips set in a frown and a wrinkle between his eyebrows. “He’s not going to let you go, and I can’t let him continue sitting in my father’s seat, hurting people the way he’s hurt you. We have to take him down.”

“How?”

He doesn’t reply, and I feel the weight in my gut grow heavier. “Alistair, what are you going to do?”

“He has to be taken care of, Stel.”

He tries to move back, but I grab his arm. “You can’t kill him. It’s one thing to kill someone who’s a danger to people, but when that someone is family…Alistair, you won’t be the same. Orrin’s death will haunt you forever.”

“I don’t care.”

“Alistair,” I snap, shoving him back a step. “Listen to me. The weight you feel about Leeta’s death? It will be so much worse if you kill Orrin.” I grasp his face in both hands, begging him to listen. “You might be able to live with the weight of his death, but I don’t think *I* can live with seeing you carry it.”

Al sighs, pulling me close again. “He has to be taken care of. I’m not letting him have you again, and I’m certainly not letting him take the capital.”

“And he won’t. But you can’t take him down by yourself. He’s dangerous, Al. Believe me, I’ve tried to hurt him before, and it didn’t go well. He’s strong—stronger than he looks—you won’t be able to kill him by yourself. You’ll need help. Lots of it.”

He considers my words, face pinching in frustration. “Fine. I’ll wait, but only if you promise me that you’ll go somewhere safe. In two weeks, you can send me the necklace and I’ll come find you. Then we’ll end Orrin.”

I nod, willing to agree to anything if it means that Alistair won’t attempt to kill Orrin. It’s true that I don’t want him to be burdened by the death of his own brother, but I’m also terrified that Orrin will kill Alistair instead.

Orrin prefers to plot and watch as his perfectly orchestrated plans come to fruition, rather than fight. But on the few occasions I’ve seen him fight, it was almost inhuman. *If Alistair gives him a reason to do it, Orrin will kill him without breaking a sweat.*

“I want you to take the quill with you,” Alistair says, oblivious to my inner turmoil. “Keep trying with it. Maybe eventually it will end your binding to my brother.”

“But what about you—”

“We tried it for hours last night and it didn’t work,” he argues, his smile sad. “It will be safer with you and away from Orrin. Once I come to you, we can try it again on my curse if it hasn’t already broken your tether to Orrin. Deal?”

I want to say no. I want to argue that there’s another way. But from the sound of it, Orrin already knows I’m here, and I’ve been an indentured spy

for long enough to know that if I stay, I'll only become a pressure point for Alistair. Someone Orrin can use to make his brother behave. *I can't let that happen.*

"Deal," I nod. Alistair wraps me in a cloak and helps me shoulder the pack he prepared. When I hear a knock on the door, I go completely still. But then I hear Mildred on the other side and I relax.

There are tears in Milly's eyes when Alistair opens the door, and even Brutus looks like he's using all his energy to hold back his emotions.

"Oh, I wish you didn't have to go," Milly cries, pulling me into a hug. I squeeze her back with equal fervor, wishing I could stay and call myself one of them.

"Me too," I mumble.

"You be careful out there, kiddo," Brutus says when it's his turn to hug me. "Let us know when you're safe."

I nod through the tears, welcoming the way his massive arms envelope me. "I will. I promise."

Once Brutus steps back, Alistair takes his place, checking the clasp of my cloak. "Time to go," he says, resigned. "Orrin was in a good mood when I left him earlier, but he won't stay that way. The moment he realizes that I don't have the necklace anymore, he'll come after you. So, I need you to ride hard and get a good head start. I'll keep him occupied, tell him that I'm waiting to use the necklace until I'm sure that he'll look for a way to free the staff. But you can't be here when he realizes that I'm not leaving."

I stare at him, everything about this plan feeling wrong. How do I know that Orrin won't kill Alistair? Or that he won't expect me to flee and already have a trap prepared?

“What if it doesn’t work?” I whisper, not ashamed of the tears that stream down my cheeks. “What if he kills you?”

Al pulls my hood up over my hair, making sure it hangs over my face. “He won’t. He only kills useless things, and thanks to our shared blood, I’m very useful. Don’t worry, Little Wolf,” he whispers, kissing my forehead. “You’ll see me again. I promise.”

Then, because he’s taking too long, I pull his mouth down to mine.

His desperation perfectly matches my own, our hands greedy as they tug each other closer. It’s a kiss for every stupid moment we spent being too stubborn to let ourselves fall in love. A kiss for every day we suffered alone before we met. For every hour we’ll be apart, and for every moment we may never have.

When we part, we’re both crying.

“I love you,” I announce sternly, an unpolished vow to never stop.

“And I love you.” He says it with equal weight, a promise weaving us together in a way that I desperately hope is magical but probably isn’t.

“Come find me when you can.”

“Always.”

Alistair clasps the necklace underneath my hair, and I drop it beneath my bodice, hating it for making me leave.

We don’t say anything more as we follow Milly and Brutus to the door. We say nothing as Alistair peeks his head into the hall to check that the way is clear. We say nothing as he gives me one last kiss goodbye and slips into the hall.

And then there’s nothing left to say at all.

# Chapter 31

## *Stella*

### the bolter

We don't come across any guards as Milly and Brutus lead me from the manor and down to the unused stables. I'm not sure why we're going there, Alistair doesn't have any horses. But then I spot the tall gelding that's already saddled in the duke's finery.

"You want me to steal a horse?" I ask as we slip between shadows to the waiting animal.

Milly sets a hand on my shoulder, her normally sweet face etched in stubbornness. "We want you to run."

Feeling the weight of the situation, I say nothing as they strap my things to the saddle and slip on the horse's bridle. But when Brutus hands me the reins, my fingers fidget with them. *Something isn't right.*

I turn to the two staff members to ask them what's going on, only to find that neither of them will look me in the eye.

"Something's happening, isn't it?" I ask, looking between the two of them.

Brutus glances at Milly, but she shakes her head. I step closer and grab her arm, not liking the resigned look in her eyes.

“Mildred, tell me right now,” I command. “If Alistair has something planned, I need to know. You haven’t seen the duke in action in the last four years. You have no idea what he’s capable of. How much stronger he’s gotten…” I break off, remembering the ferocity with which the duke fought the few times I saw him engage in battle. Only animals fight like that. “If Alistair is going to do something stupid, you have to tell me.”

Milly keeps her lips pressed together and I turn to Brutus. He tilts his head, pleading with me to leave it be. But I just raise an eyebrow and wait.

“The master is…” he begins, sighing. “He’s planning to—”

“Don’t you dare, Brutus,” Milly snaps.

“Milly, if Alistair is planning something, I need to know about it,” I insist.

“No, you need to go,” she begs, grabbing my hands as she cries. Though her concern for me is touching, my gut tells me that Alistair needs me more than I need freedom.

“Brutus?” I turn to the cook.

He ignores Milly’s glare. “He’s going to try to kill the duke the minute we tell him you’ve left the grounds.”

Anger boils up in me and I toss the reins aside. Alistair promised me that he wouldn’t go after Orrin alone. *The liar!* He doesn’t get to worry about my safety and put me first if I’m not allowed to return the favor.

I turn toward the manor, my stomach clenching with worry and uncertainty. Normally, I would run away in a situation like this. The goal has always been to get to a neighboring kingdom where Orrin can’t come after me. To finally find freedom.

*But I wouldn't have Alistair.* Or Milly or Brutus or Maddy or Francesca. And I've come to realize that I like being part of a pack.

*But if I walk in there, I have to be prepared for what happens if we win.* If we lose, I'll go back to being Orrin's slave. But that's nothing new. I've survived it before, I can survive it again so long as Alistair lives.

But if we *win,* Alistair will become a duke, and I'll be his duchess.

Part of me can't help but feel that being the duchess would be like entering another cage, this one plush and opulent, but a cage all the same.

I wasn't born to be a duchess. The people couldn't possibly come to love me or even respect me. My past is too messy, a crown will only make my mistakes sparkle.

But what's the alternative? Running—again? *Is that all I'm ever going to be—the bolter?* I can see myself at eighty years old, using an alias and moving every year, afraid to even make an acquaintance.

But I also see another picture. Me going after Alistair. Us defeating Orrin and going home to Roburry. In this daydream, the journey to earning the trust of the people is long, but Alistair and I manage it. Together.

It's a picture that I don't want to fade away. And even if it never comes to fruition, I think it's one worth running after. 'Run, Little Wolf,' the duke used to say, mocking me. But it's not his voice I hear in my head.

It's Alistair's, full of love and protection. And this time, I'm not running away. I'm running toward something.

*Run, Little Wolf.* And I do.

# Chapter 32

## Alistair

if i'm on fire, you'll be made of ashes too

The hall is empty ahead of me, my brother's guards nowhere to be found. I'm not sure if he has them doing some devious task that he doesn't want me to know about, or if Stella is right and my brother has grown strong enough that he doesn't need them.

It wouldn't surprise me if Orrin found an artifact to intensify his strength. It would, however, be inconvenient for me should he decide to get violent. I'm not bad in a fight, but if magic is involved, it won't matter how skilled I am.

My tentative steps freeze altogether as I come to the library doors. Which are open.

I didn't think that locking the doors would keep Orrin out, but I hoped he would be too busy to bother breaking in. *I should have known better.*

My movements are silent as I step inside, ready for whatever Orrin will throw at me. My research has been moved to my room, and Stella's painting has been covered with tapestries. But Orrin has been in this room before.

He knows how it usually looks.

“I knew you were lying,” he says, standing before the uncovered mural, his back to me as he studies the wall. “Jareth told me that you were quite aggressive when he came here looking for her. He thought it was normal for you to behave so abrupt, but as your brother, I knew better.”

“Did you?” I ask, glancing over to see Narcissus standing on the table, his back arched as he hisses at Orrin. The image makes me smile. *Smart cat*. “I’ll admit that you knew me well four years ago. But you don’t know a thing about who I am now.”

Orrin laughs, the sound warped by bitterness. “You think you’ve grown so much, little brother. But you’ve just gone soft.”

“And you’ve grown hard. Tell me, when did that happen?” I ask, trying to pinpoint the moment when I first lost my brother. “You’ve always been clever and mischievous, but you used to be loving too, and you were never violent. What happened to you?”

He turns, and though his expression is cold, there’s a desperation in his eyes that I don’t quite understand. “Funny,” he says. “In the ten years that I’ve been this way, you’ve never asked that question.”

The words feel like an accusation, and I recoil. He’s right. I didn’t ask.

I didn’t care so long as his behavior didn’t negatively affect me. I was selfish and cruel and apathetic. *It’s a wonder Stella ever managed to love me.*

“I wasn’t a good brother,” I admit readily. “I didn’t even notice how different you were until…” My throat becomes thick at the memory of my father’s death. It’s something I don’t revisit often, and something that Orrin and I have never discussed together.

“Until I killed Father?” he prompts, completely unbothered. “You might as well say the words out loud. It’s not as if he’s alive to be offended by them.”

I take a step toward him, my fists clenched at my sides. I want to feel his skin break under my knuckles, to see him just as bloody and bruised as he’s made my soul. To damage him the way he did Stella.

But as I move closer, he doesn’t raise a fist. He doesn’t grab his knife. He just stands there, hands clasped in front of him.

“Do it,” he says, unbothered. “Beat me. Kill me. Get your vengeance. Just remember that if I’m on fire, you’ll be made of ashes too, brother. We’re in this together. In life and death.”

But something about the look in his eyes gives me pause. I don’t know if it’s only now appeared or if I was just too self-obsessed to notice it all these years. But my brother—the monster who oppressed the love of my life and killed my father—looks *sad*.

Not regretful or repentant, but just…lost. Like a little boy who’s found himself in the dark and is desperate for a nightlight to guide him out.

“Orrin?” I whisper, reaching out to touch him.

In a flash, the sadness disappears, and he shoves me, his face twisting in anger. “Do it!” he shouts. “Kill me!”

“No." Feeling sure of my decision, I pull the parchment from my pocket, turning to set it and the quill on the table. “I want you to sign this. It’s reassurance that once I leave with you, you won’t hurt my staff or Stella.”

Orrin laughs dryly, looking bemused that I want something for someone other than myself. “Excuse me? You have the opportunity to repay me for everything I did to you, and instead you want me to sign a cease fire?”

“Yes.”

His expression becomes stiff, unreadable. But there's a flash of hope in his eyes. "Why?"

"Because you're my brother, and at some point, you became this," I wave my hand at him, "And I didn't notice. That's *my* fault. But I'm going to make it right, which starts by going back to Roburry with you. I'll be your duke, I'll follow your orders, but you have to promise that these people will remain safe."

Orrin is skeptical as he walks to the table and reads the simple contract I've written. His lips smile, but his eyes don't.

"She has to be punished for her insubordination," he says, cocking an eyebrow.

"And she will be. If you choose not to punish her now, she'll spend the next few years always on edge, wondering when you'll decide to do it. And isn't her drawn out anxiety a better punishment than being beaten quickly?"

He grunts, considering my words. "Now that I think about it, I might go ahead and give her to you. She will still be indentured to me, but she could make a useful duchess. She has the necessary skills to ferret out secrets and plant misinformation. Being your wife would just give her better access." He glances at me. "And it would give you proper motivation to behave."

I school my features not to give away how disgusted I am by the notion that he wants to offer Stella to me like a horse.

"All I care about is that she's safe," I say calmly, keeping my features placid. "If I get to be with her, that's more than I could hope for."

Orrin's blue eyes narrow at the parchment, and he snatches up the quill. "I won't sign this and give you the impression that you've bested me."

I don’t react, knowing that Stella is still within his grasp should he choose to go after her now. *Don’t give him anything.*

“Instead, when I sign this,” he says, pointing the quill at me, “See it as a show of good faith. This is a gift to you, dear Brother. I’m doing this out of generosity.” Then he bends over the parchment and signs his name on the bottom.

The moment he completes it, his body goes still. Slowly, his eyes turn to mine. But they don’t look angry. Instead, I see relief there, despite the hard set to his face.

“Orrin?” I whisper, moving closer.

His hand flies up so fast I don’t see it coming, but before he can latch it around my throat, he freezes. “What did you do?”

# Chapter 33

## Stella

### daRkest little paradise

**Twenty minutes ago…**

"I'm going after him," I declare, marching toward the manor.

Brutus grabs my arm. "You can't go in there."

"I am not letting him do this alone," I growl, refusing to be carted away.

Brutus turns from me to Milly, looking like he wishes he could just slap the lot of us for our stubbornness. I don't blame him. We are a problematic bunch.

"You're not going to listen to us, are you?" he asks. I shake my head and he sighs. "Fine. I'll go find Alistair and tell him to come to you."

Smiling, I hug him tightly. Surprised by the action, he just stands there for a moment before awkwardly patting my back. "Alright, let me go so I can get him."

"Wait," I take off my pack and dig out the quill that I stole from Jareth. Using a page from my journal, I scribble a note onto it for Alistair. I don't trust him not to ignore Brutus and go after Orrin anyway.

*Alistair (you get no nicknames from me since I'm furious with you),*

*I don’t know why this needs to be stated to you in writing as I think I’ve made myself perfectly clear, but I’m not leaving you. Not until the day I die. And if you do anything stupid that may result in us being parted sooner than death, I will hate you forever.*

*If you have any arguments against my decision, feel free to come and find me. Fair warning: if you don’t come find me in the next ten minutes, I’ll find you.*

*-Stella*

The moment the quill scrapes the last flourish of my name on the page, I feel a strange sensation spread across my body like glitter sparkling through my veins. I blink, feeling a tug on my chest that tries to pull me back toward the manor.

I glance at the sun, wondering if the curse has overcome the power of the necklace to drag me to the dining room, but we still have at least twenty minutes until sunset.

“I don’t understand. If it’s not the curse…” I look around, confused, and my eyes skim over the note in my hand. And then the quill. *Wait…*

I quickly reread my words, which are now written in shimmering ink. *Magic.* A grin stretches across my face.

“Miss Stella?” Milly asks, worried.

“Get Alistair. I know how to take down the duke."

***

Ten minutes later, I’m hiding in an empty horse stall waiting for Alistair.

Brutus stands guard by the stall door—Milly insisted that he stay and protect me. And because I wanted to get Alistair here as quickly as possible, I didn’t argue with her about it.

When we hear a set of footsteps entering the stables, Brutus straightens from the wall and slides closer to the stall door, motioning for me to stay back in the corner. I do as he indicates and wait as the footsteps draw nearer.

“Lady Lion?” Alistair whispers.

I don’t wait for Brutus to move out of the way, pushing him aside and opening the stall door. Then I launch myself at Alistair.

He catches me, stumbling back a few steps and laughing into my hair. Even when he sets my feet on the ground, I don’t let go, my arms banded tight around his middle.

“It’s good to see you too, Freckles,” he says, his smile turning into a glare. “But you were supposed to be long gone by now. What’s this Milly tells me about a way to take down Orrin?”

Reluctantly, I pull out of his hold and dig the note I wrote out of my pocket. “Here, look.” I point to the shimmering letters. “The quill *is* magical; we just weren’t using it right. When we tested it yesterday and wrote that your curse had been broken, we assumed that the quill made written words true. But what it actually does is make any vows or contracts signed with this quill magically bound. You see, I wrote that I wouldn’t be parted from you until I die, and the moment I signed my name, I felt myself being pulled back to the manor. To you.”

“That’s just the curse—”

“Then how come I don’t feel pulled to the manor now?” I demand, hands on my hips. “I feel pulled to *you*.”

His brows furrow as he considers my words, his dimples deepening as he purses his lips. “Give me the quill.”

I hand the magical artifact over and he flips my note to the other side, scribbling something on the back. I know the moment he writes his name because he straightens up, his green eyes finding mine immediately.

"Well?" I ask.

A smile breaks out across his face, and he wags the quill in his hand. "I think I just made some magical marriage vows."

He hands me the paper.

*Little Wolf,*

*This manor is a prison—or was. But you made it a palace. You brought light to the darkest little paradise. And while I think this should go without saying, I hope that having some magic back up my words will assure you of how I feel.*

*I love you, Little Wolf, and I will not leave you until the day I die. You make me crazy, but I don't think it would be love if you didn't. So I promise to keep loving your crazy and no one else's until the very end.*

*-Alistair*

I smile at the makeshift vows, slightly embarrassed that Brutus is close by listening. But the shimmering ink of Alistair's vows prove my theory correct.

"If Orrin signs a contract with this quill, he'll be magically bound to it."

"But didn't he send you to find that quill?" Alistair points out. "Won't he know what it is once he sees it?"

I shrug at the golden quill in his hand. "Nothing a little paint can't hide."

# Chapter 34

## Alistair

there wouldn't be this if there hadn't Been you

**Currently…**

Orrin's hand hovers in the air where he tried to reach for my throat, his attempt thwarted by magic.

"You see brother, you just signed a magical contract," I explain, rolling up the parchment. "On the front, it says that you will not hurt my staff or Stella. But on the back, it says that you will never harm another living soul so long as you live. Oh, and that you're abdicating the dukedom and handing it over to me."

A growl escapes him, but he does nothing to move against me. Nor does he fight me off when I clap a pair of irons around his wrists.

In fact, he looks almost happy. But then his eyes drift to something behind me.

I turn as Stella enters the room, staring at Orrin like he's a phantom. He stares back, and now that I've started paying attention to other people's feelings, I realize that there's the tiniest hint of shame in his eyes.

Stella walks forward, gaze locked with Orrin's. So many emotions cross over her face that I don't have time to catch them all. She's afraid, angry, resentful, hurt, relieved, sad.

But by the time she reaches him, I just see immense amounts of strength being used to keep her from throwing her fists in his face.

"I…forgive you." The words come slow, like she has to grind them out one by one. Tears are gathered in her eyes and her expression is half glare and half sorrow. "But I cannot trust you. So, if I ever see your face again, I will shoot it on sight."

Orrin nods. "Fair enough, Little—"

"Don't," Stella snaps. "Only Alistair can call me that."

Orrin looks between Stella and me, his emotions too tumultuous and tangled to read. But he doesn't fight Brutus and Carson as they lead him to the dungeon we've never had a reason to use. Tilda and Denise follow behind them, but I don't think Orrin will give them any trouble. The contract will keep him in check.

"Have I told you yet today that I love you, Little Wolf?" I whisper as Stella turns and wraps her arms around my middle, pressing her face against my chest.

"Yes, but I've been meaning to tell you that I need to hear it throughout the day."

I chuckle and lay my cheek against her hair, closing my eyes and breathing in the feeling of freedom. "The curse is gone," I say, squeezing her close.

"I know, I felt it when you tried to force me to leave the manor so you could get yourself killed."

"I'm going to be paying for that one for a while, aren't I?"

“Forever,” she quips happily. “But what was it that broke the curse? You sending me away?”

I hum, thinking back to the Poet who cast the curse. “Maybe I was supposed to be willing to sacrifice in order to break the curse?”

“Silly boy,” a twinkling voice scoffs. “You had to love someone unconditionally and be willing to let them go for the sake of the greater good. That’s what broke the curse.”

Stella and I both go still in each other’s arms. “You heard that too, right?” she whispers.

“Of course he heard it,” the twinkling voice says.

Slowly, Stella and I pull apart and see a woman sitting in my chair, her feet kicked up on the table and Narcissus curled up on her lap.

“*You,*” I gasp. “You’re the Poet who cursed me.”

She looks the same as she did that night, albeit without the ballgown. Now she wears pants beneath a split overskirt and a shirt beneath a laced-up bodice similar to the way Stella dresses. Her smooth black hair is pulled up into a ponytail, the end of it trailing over her shoulder, and her dark eyes watch me with morbid enjoyment. She’s beautiful, but I somehow find her less impressive than I used to.

Probably because I’m now completely obsessed with my intended. Stella may not have said yes yet, but she will. I’m not letting her go a second time.

"Technically, I'm a Lyricist, not a Poet. But that's beside the point," the woman shrugs.

“How did you get here?” Stella asks, looking around the room like she might find a horse or carriage just sitting around.

The Poet waves a careless hand, the other scratching Narcissus' head. "I won't explain the details of Poetry—it's complicated for non-Poets. But magic is tied to the person who cast it. So, when your curse broke, the magic alerted me. Plus, I've been watching you for a while."

"You've been watching me? And you didn't think to help?" I exclaim, four years' worth of frustration oozing out of me.

"I couldn't interfere," the woman replies simply. "It would damage the magic and that would be much worse than your curse ever was. Trust me."

"I'm sorry, did you say that he had to fall in love with someone and then give them up in order to break the curse?" Stella squawks, still a little confused.

"Yes and no," the Poet says, tilting her head from side to side. "You had to love someone *unconditionally*. Technically it would have worked even if you'd loved someone as if they were a sibling. Romance was not a requirement. But the second part was crucial—you needed to be willing to let that person go from your life for the sake of others."

I stare at her, annoyed by the revelation. "So it was a test."

"Yes!" She grins. "I knew your brother had to be removed as duke, but I couldn't just have you replace him. You were too selfish and shortsighted —no offense."

"None taken," I shrug. She's not wrong.

"You needed to learn how to love without the hope of a reward," the Poet explains. "And you needed to learn how to sacrifice that love for the wellbeing of the people you were meant to rule."

"And making me burn in the sun?" I seethe, recalling every burn and laceration I got from the barest crack in the drapes or the very first rays of

sunlight when I didn't quite make it back to the manor before sunrise. "Was that truly necessary?"

"Yes. You needed to build empathy, and the best way to do that is to understand suffering. If I had just imprisoned you the way I did the servants, you would have been annoyed, but you wouldn't have suffered."

I want to be angry. To shout at her for ruining my life. But I don't.

"Thank you," I say instead, and the Poet raises her eyebrows. "There wouldn't be this," I give Stella a gentle squeeze, "If there hadn't been you."

The Poet studies me, impressed. "You've changed. I like it."

"Of course, I think making Stella appear ugly was a little much," I taunt, not really angry anymore, "But at least I met her. So I can't complain."

"And yet you did," the Poet smiles.

"Why did you make me appear ugly?" Stella asks.

The Poet tilts her head at me. "Love wouldn't be unconditional if Alistair only saw women as baubles or jewels now, would it? Making women appear unattractive to him was a way to remove any selfish benefit he would have gotten out of the situation."

To my shock and slight disgust, Stella takes a seat across from the woman, resting her chin on her fist, almost as if she's enamored with her. "What's your name?"

The stranger eyes Stella with approval, her smile friendly. "I like you. You picked a good one, Alistair. You can call me Abigail."

"Stella," my fickle fiancée says, shaking Abigail's hand. "Now you wouldn't happen to have any ideas of where to put Orrin for the time being or any advice on how Alistair can transition smoothly into being the duke, would you?"

Abigail’s grin turns mischievous. “Do I ever.”

# Chapter 35

## Stella

### take oN the world

**One week later…**

"Mistress Abigail is back," Milly announces. Alistair and I look up from the books we've spent the last hour packing here in the library.

Abigail insisted that we move forward with our plan to take back the duchy but asked that we not leave for the castle until she returned. So we've spent the last week packing up the things we plan to take with us.

We've also spent a fair amount of time soothing each other's panic attacks.

Alistair is afraid he won't make a good duke, and I assure him that I know he'll be wonderful. Meanwhile, I'm terrified that the people won't accept me as a duchess, but Alistair promises me that only an idiot wouldn't welcome me as a leader.

But as I like to remind him, the people we are about to rule may very well be idiots. He hates it when I point that out.

"Did she say anything to you?" Alistair demands as we follow Milly down the hall toward the foyer.

Milly shakes her head. “No, but she brought a man with her.”

I share a look with Alistair and he grabs my hand. Abigail didn’t tell us specifically what she had planned to help Alistair take on his role as the duke. We hope that the transition won’t be too terrible since the people are used to dealing with Orrin. But we won’t really know until we return to Roburry.

As for Orrin, we have no idea what Abigail did with him other than that he is alive and safe and incapable of harming anyone. Alistair is anxious about leaving his brother’s care to someone else, but I trust Abigail.

If anyone can handle Orrin, it’s her.

At first, Alistair was concerned that I didn't tell Orrin how I felt before Abigail carted him off. He thought I should get some closure and lay into his brother for all the things he did to me. But I told him that I didn't need closure. Not anymore.

My time here in the manor has brought me happiness I didn't know I could have, making any words I might have had for Orrin feel unnecessary.

“It’ll be okay,” Alistair whispers as we round a corner. I know that the words are more for himself than me. He’s convinced that the people of Roburry will take one look at him and assume he’s just a replicant of his brother, but I know better.

The people have no love for Orrin. Our transition to leadership may not be perfect, but it won’t be as horrible as Alistair thinks.

At least, the reaction to *Alistair* won’t be as bad as he thinks. The reaction to me, on the other hand, I’m unsure about.

My position as a spy for the duke was maintained by secrets. Most people had no idea what I did or who I was. Even the guards in the castle thought I was just the duke’s misfit servant. No one knew of my skills as a

thief or how often I disguised myself and told lies on the duke's behalf. But still, I've wronged enough people that some are bound to recognize me.

Especially when I come into the city on horseback beside the duke's brother.

But Alistair continues to reassure me that as a victim of Orrin's evil, the people are likely to see me as their champion for defeating him. He also plans to tell everyone that it was me who took down Orrin. We're still in disagreement on that part.

"Ah, there you are," Abigail greets us as we walk into the foyer. She hasn't told us much about herself and I suspect that Abigail is not her real name. But I don't blame her for keeping secrets. Poets are secretive for good reason. People like Orrin would leap at the opportunity to use them if only they could.

"I have someone I'd like for you to meet," Abigail says, motioning toward a shorter man with thick black hair. He watches us enter but doesn't smile, too busy studying us carefully. "This is Francis, steward to the Queen of Andonia."

My eyes widen, mirroring Alistair's expression. We both immediately bob our heads and murmur polite greetings.

Francis says nothing, completely still as he watches us. Just when the silence is becoming awkward, he steps forward and shakes our hands.

"It's a pleasure to meet you two," he says politely, his expression suddenly much warmer. Like he's decided that we can be trusted. "I'm glad I finally found you."

"Found us?" Alistair questions, looking between Francis and Abigail.

The man nods, pulling a roll of parchment from the satchel at his waist. “The queen has been searching for you for a while now. You see, for the past four years, your brother has been telling people that you died on the night that you were cursed. He forbade anyone to speak of you lest they want to lose their head.”

Alistair rolls his eyes, neither of us surprised that Orrin went to such lengths to keep Alistair’s curse a secret. He wouldn’t want such a weakness advertised to those who opposed him.

“The queen never believed this to be true—she knows how dangerous your brother is. It is, however, difficult to have a noble removed from their position without proof of their wrongdoings. And as I’m sure you know; your brother is quite crafty and difficult to get the upper hand with.”

Alistair and I both laugh bitterly, acutely aware of this fact.

“Two years ago,” Francis continues, “The queen discovered that your father made an alteration to the succession and had you named as his heir instead of your brother. The papers were filed in the capital, and since your father never revised them before he died, you are the legal heir to the dukedom, not your brother. This was the perfect loophole to have your brother removed, but unfortunately, we could not find you until now. For if you really had been dead, your brother would be the rightful heir.”

Alistair turns to me, eyes wide in shock, and I stare back, unsure if I should be surprised, happy, anxious, or all of the above. I’m relieved that we have the queen’s support, therefore making our transition much easier. But I’m also anxious because this news means that our return to Roburry is happening soon.

And I’m not sure if I’m ready.

“Abigail has explained your situation to the queen,” Francis goes on, reading through the parchment in his hands. “We’re pleased to hear that Orrin has been subdued and is in good hands, but sorry to discover how much pain he caused you before he was caught.” These last words he says to me, and I fidget self-consciously as I give a pointed look to Abigail.

I’d prefer that the queen of all people not have knowledge of my indiscretions. But apparently, I don’t get a say in the matter.

“Don’t worry,” Francis assures me, pulling a second parchment from his bag. The first he hands to Alistair and the second to me. “The queen has made provisions for the both of you. On those parchments you will find an official statement declaring that the queen has given her endorsement to your roles as duke and duchess. Miss Stella, on yours is also a complete pardon for all of the things you did while under the employ of Orrin as well as a pardon for the death of your stepfather. The queen is aware of the circumstances of your crimes and believes that your actions were not selfish nor malicious. It is her opinion that given what Mistress Abigail has told her, you will make a great duchess.”

Alistair beams at me and I blush, wondering if the queen will still feel that way when she meets me. Because according to this paper, she will be meeting me fairly soon.

“She wants me to visit her?” I ask dumbly, awestruck by the invitation written in swirling, sloping handwriting.

“Yes,” Francis nods. “Her advice is for the two of you to return to Roburry as soon as possible and announce your ascension to the dukedom. Take some time to weed out staff members who may still be loyal to Orrin, have a public wedding—the more you include the people, the more the queen believes they will accept you—and then she wishes for you to travel

to the capital and be presented to the nobility as her personal friends. This way you will have the queen's public endorsement as well as an opportunity to learn a few things about being part of the nobility."

I'm so busy trying to make sense of the words on the page that I barely hear Alistair and Francis speaking with Abigail. *The queen wants me to shadow her?* I can't fathom why she would want to waste so much effort on a girl like me. Especially given my history.

"Stella?" Alistair says, and I look up to find that we're now alone in the foyer. "I sent them to the dining room for refreshments. I want to know how you're doing with all of this."

His hands slide over my jaw, his touch warm and safe. It's strange to think that when I met him here three months ago, we could barely stand to be in the same room. And now I hate being in any room he's not in. *Because I'm a pathetic, love-struck puppy.* And I'm loving it.

"It's a lot," I answer honestly. "I can't say that I'm eager to be scrutinized by the public, but I think being presented to court by the queen will help me feel a little more capable." I pause, fully taking in what this opportunity means. "I've never wanted a position of authority like this, but after being under Orrin's thumb for so long, and Paul before him, I think I'm a little excited. Somewhere out there is a girl suffering like I did, and now I might actually be able to help her in ways that no one knew to help me."

Alistair's smile is proud, his dimples deep and the love in his green eyes even deeper. It's nice to see him this way, sun streaming freely onto his face without the curse to burn him. He's lighter now, his entire countenance no longer carrying the weight of the curse. He was handsome before, but now he's gorgeous.

“It won’t be easy,” he says, leaning his forehead against mine, “But it will be worthwhile. And let’s be honest, we survived a curse and my psychotic brother. We can handle anything so long as we’re doing it together.”

“Even if we have to take on the world?”

He nods, running his nose along the length of mine, my eyes closed as I breathe in his nearness. “We’ll take it on together.”

“Together,” I whisper against his lips.

# Chapter 36

## Alistair

### washed away

**Three days later…**

Stella's fingers squeeze mine. Tight. Her expression appears serene, her hair woven into an intricate braid and a custom green velvet dress flowing over her legs against the saddle. But I see the way she clenches the reigns, her knuckles white. The way her eyes dart everywhere, looking for threats.

*She's terrified.*

We left the manor the morning after Abigail and Francis arrived, and we've been riding nonstop to get to the castle before sunset.

Abigail has some romantic vision of us riding into the city with the sun's last rays shining on our faces and people throwing roses at our horses' feet. *Like that's going to happen.* The people might be happy to see Abigail, as pretty as she is, but once they see me, I doubt our reception will be warm.

"Alright, it's time," Abigail shouts from the front of the group. We're a rather large party, with all of the staff from the manor, Francis, Abigail

and a host of guards that the queen sent to accompany her advisor. But I gather that Abigail was hoping that our entourage would help us make a splash.

“Your Graces, you’ll be here behind a few guards,” she shouts, waving her hand to urge Stella and I forward. “Francis, you’ll be behind them. Then we’ll do four more guards followed by the manor staff in the wagon and the rest of the guards will bring up the rear.”

Once we’re all in formation, the Poet nods, approving of our positions. “Now remember, while we do not anticipate any hostility, all guards should be on high alert for anyone who may be loyal to Orrin. I can’t imagine that any such person exists,” she grimaces, “But it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

The forest has thinned the closer we’ve gotten to Roburry, and now we’re nearly to the city gates. At Francis' advice, we chose not to send a messenger ahead and announce our arrival. He didn’t want any of Orrin’s followers to be prepared for us, and I agreed.

I want Jareth in particular to be a sitting duck when I find him.

“Are you sure you’re ready?” I ask, urging my borrowed mount a little closer to Stella.

She turns to me, and I’m struck with how beautiful she is. After seeing her every day for three months, one would think that I would be unfazed. But I saw only a mask made by the curse for most of that time, her true face hidden from me.

Yet even now, after seeing the real her every day for a few weeks, I know I’ll never get sick of it. Never get tired of tracing her freckles or kissing her smiles. *A lifetime isn’t long enough.*

“Not in the least,” she admits, squaring her shoulders. “But we can handle it.”

“Yes,” I lift our twined fingers and kiss the back of her hand, “We can.” Then I nod to Abigail, and she leads our party through the city gates.

It takes the people of Roburry a while to realize that we’re more than mere travelers as we pass through the streets. But once they notice Francis' official uniform and Stella and mine’s matching Roburry finery, they all stop to watch.

People on horseback dismount and move to the side of the street even though there’s room enough for them to pass. Kids cease their playing and watch with wide wistful eyes at our procession. When the city guards see us, some of them recognize me, but even the ones who don’t seem to understand fairly quickly who I am.

I don’t expect them to know what to do with me, given that they haven’t heard the news about Orrin yet. But when a few people here and there begin to salute, they’re not looking at me.

They’re looking at Stella.

An older inn owner smiles at my fiancée, saluting the duchess-to-be with a hopeful smile. A grizzled blacksmith does the same, giving her a nod as we pass. Children smile and wave, business owners salute and nod. Nearly half the population is looking at Stella like she’s a hero returned from battle.

“I know them,” Stella whispers beside me. “The inn owner was there the first time I tried to escape and Orrin found me. She wanted to help but he was too powerful to oppose.”

“And the blacksmith?” I ask, needing to hear how these people have come to adore the woman I love.

Stella smirks at me, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “Orrin sent me to bankrupt him for his refusal to make weapons that could carry poisons. I did as he asked, but I went back later and left the man some money from Orrin’s stores and a note telling him to start over elsewhere. Clearly, he didn’t listen.”

“Sounds a lot like you,” I grin, leaning over to kiss her cheek. “And the children?”

“I set up a system with the kitchen workers to get the left over scraps to the children without Orrin finding out about it." She shakes her head. "But I don’t understand how they all know my face. I was always so careful.”

But they do know her face. On and on the cycle goes. A woman she was supposed to ruin but didn’t. A family she was supposed to split up but helped instead. Every time Orrin sent her to do a job, she defied him when she could, and made it up to people when she couldn’t.

Soon the streets are lined with people saluting, their eyes filled with admiration. And as I dote on Stella, holding her hand, kissing her cheek and being generally bemused with her, their admiration trickles over to me too.

For the first time, I truly think we can do this.

When we make it to the castle gates, Abigail announces us to the guards. They argue with her for a moment, insisting that I’m dead, but she wins in the end and they let us through. The people follow in after us, the gates kept open at my command.

Once our party is safely positioned behind our guards, Stella and I turn so we can see the crowd smooshed together in the courtyard. It takes a few moments for them to quiet down, their expressions a mixture of hopeful

and distrusting. While many of them have positive experiences with Stella, to others we're a stranger and a dead man.

"For those of you who do not remember me," I shout, sitting up straight in my saddle. "I'm Alistair Godfrey, son of Dinah and Robert Godfrey. My brother, Orrin Godfrey, has stepped down as duke and will no longer sit at Roburry castle. Instead, I will take his place, and my fiancée, Stella Freemont, will be my duchess."

The silence is deafening.

I long to glance at Stella and see how she's faring, but I don't want anyone to know how anxious we are. We need to appear strong and capable, not overwhelmed and terrified.

"Alistair," Stella says, and I look over to find her pointing at someone sneaking from the castle steps toward the crowd, keeping close to the stone wall.

"Jareth," I curse under my breath. "Stop him," I shout, pointing to the heinous man.

Our archers knock their arrows and a moment later, Jareth falls to the ground, an arrow in his shoulder.

He screams like a dying pig, picking himself up and clutching the arm of his wounded shoulder. When his eyes find Stella, his nostrils flare with rage. He takes a step closer, but an arrow hits the stone at his feet.

When his eyes find me, he goes still.

"Let that be a warning," I call out, my voice deathly cold. "My brother's reign was cruel and self-serving. Those who wish to continue such practices will not be welcome in Roburry. And anyone who has ever harmed my wife—"

"Fiancée," Stella corrects me with a smile.

“Will be punished. However, anyone who yearns for peace and is willing to participate in the revival of our city is welcome to stay.”

The crowd’s continued silence fills me with uncertainty. *Maybe it wasn’t so smart to shoot someone on the first day.* But I can’t come to regret it. It’s the least that Jareth deserves.

From the back of the crowd, a grizzly looking man with a beard steps a bit closer, and I go still. The last time I saw him, my mother was on his saddle and he was taking her away to safety. *The Baron.*

He gives me a nod which I return. Though I’m desperate to ask about my mother, I’ll wait until I can speak to him privately. Stella must notice him too, because she smiles.

“That’s how they knew me,” she whispers. "All this time, he's been telling them about me."

The Baron grins at us and raises his fist in the air. “Long live the Godfreys,” he shouts with a wink.

There’s a pause, and I wonder if anyone will echo him.

But then the crowd raises their fists and shouts, “Long live the Godfreys.” They repeat the chant, and while some people are still sour faced at our arrival, most of them are smiling.

“We can do this,” Stella says, tugging on my hand.

Leaning over, I kiss her as the crowd cheers. We still have a lot of ground to cover, but hearing the crowd chant for our victory, I feel like the rain has finally come. Like after years of enduring it, the cruelty my brother tainted us all with is being washed away.

Today is the start of a new beginning.

# Epilogue

## Stella

long stOry short

**One year later…**

"Have you seen my husband?" I ask, poking my head into the kitchen.

Brutus looks up from where he and Kaitlyn are decorating the cake for tonight. It's four layers, draped in yellow and accented with little bronze sunbeams all over. Alistair doesn't know it, but today we're celebrating one year of sunshine.

After the wedding last year, we took our time traveling to the capital, treating the trip like a honeymoon. We slept in late, stayed at nice inns, ate too much food, and kissed a *lot*.

I smile at the memories we've made over the last year. It's been hard. The people welcomed us as replacements for Orrin's cruelty, but they were slow to trust. That, Alistair and I had no problem understanding. So we were patient and benevolent and did as the queen suggested.

During our first week in Roburry, Alistair met with each castle staff member and every city guard and listened to their reports of their time

during the duke's reign. It took a month to verify the stories and determine which people had committed crimes under Orrin's reign under duress and which had done so happily.

A small portion of the staff was let go, a few sentenced to work in the mines up north, and some executed.

Jareth is currently serving the eleventh month of his five-year sentence in the mines, and his supervisor says he still complains of the arrow wound he got on our first day in the city.

I haven't said anything to my husband, but a part of me hopes that Jareth comes out of those mines a different man. A better one.

Alistair thinks he'll just come out vengeful, which is why we monitor his progress so closely with letters from his supervisor every month. But tonight, I won't lose any sleep over it.

"Last I saw him, he stole some food and was on his way outside," Brutus says, concentrating on the cake.

"He said not to disturb him because he was going to visit his mistress," Kaitlynn giggles, handing her father a bag of icing.

I roll my eyes, pretending to be annoyed with my husband's obsession. "I swear, I don't know who married him. Me or her."

"Her," Kaitlyn laughs.

I leave the two of them and head for the garden. The castle feels so much different now that Orrin isn't the one in charge of it. Guards nod as I pass, their uniforms now brown leather with green accents instead of black.

People are friendlier, the mood is lighter, and the place looks happier. Though that may have something to do with the fact that when we got home from our time with the queen, Alistair begged me to paint as many murals in the castle as I was willing to do.

Having many dark memories here myself, I readily agreed.

I smile as I walk past a long wall painted with roses and blue skies. It's amazing how a little bit of art can quickly turn a prison into a palace.

"Oh, your Grace," Milly grins as she walks toward me, a young maid trailing behind her. "If you're looking for the master—"

"He's with his other wife, I know."

She laughs and pats my hand. The eyes of the maid behind her go wide at the familiarity. Many of the staff are still put off that Alistair and I have such familiar relationships with those who were trapped with us at the manor. But we pay them no mind.

Mildred bids me good luck, chuckling as she leads the confused maid away. When I finally make it out to the garden, I find my husband in the arms of his favorite woman.

"And what, pray tell, do you think you're doing?" I say, arms crossed as I walk through the garden door and into the sunlight.

Alistair just smiles, his eyes closed as he lays out on the lawn, his arms tucked behind his head. "Waiting for you." He unfolds one arm out beside him, an unspoken invitation.

"Am I supposed to lie with you while you're thinking of another woman?"

His eyes squint open and he looks up at me. He's unfairly handsome at all times, but especially when he's happy like this. "Who says I'm thinking of anyone but you?"

"Oh? And what are you thinking?"

"Lay down and I'll tell you."

I glance back at the guards who flank the door back into the castle, but they stare straight ahead, unfazed by our behavior. Sighing, I lie next to

my husband, still a little unused to living with a constant audience.

Alistair's arm immediately curls me closer until I have my head on his shoulder and my hand on his chest. "Alright, pay up," I say. "Are you thinking about your other wife?"

He smirks and I resist the urge to kiss the look away. "Mm…sort of."

I smack his chest and he chuckles. "Easy there, Tiger. Let me finish."

I raise an expectant brow and he turns his head to look at me. "Yes, I'm thinking about my mistress. The way she heats my skin and shines through my eyelids. The way she makes me so cozy that I'm delirious. But mostly, I'm thinking about you lying with me, her rays warming our skin…"

His nose nuzzles my temple and I feel his fingers dancing along the bare skin on my arm. My hand flexes on his shirt, and I feel my heart start pounding.

"And did I mention that our clothes are discarded in the grass in this daydream?" he teases, whispering in my ear.

"Alistair!" I squeal, wiggling as he kisses my neck. "You can't talk like that when there are people around."

He lifts his head and glances carelessly at the guards. "They're paid not to pay attention to us unless we're in danger. And I think if I pay them a little more money, they'll wait for us inside."

"You are in danger," I say, shoving him back to the ground and setting my elbows on his chest to prop myself up. "From your wife."

"No, I don't think sunshine is burning me today," he says, inspecting his hands.

I nudge him and he grins, wrapping his arms around my back. "You're a pain," I whisper, relaxing against him.

"I love you too, Little Wolf."

I smile and kiss him, grateful even when he annoys me. His hands are in my hair, and based on the groans rumbling in his chest, I think he's genuinely considering losing our clothes here in the grass. But though I may be tempted to get lost in my handsome husband, I'm too aware of all the windows behind us to actually do it.

"Later," I whisper, laying my cheek against his chest, the beat of his heart pulsing fast in my ear.

"Mm, deal," he hums, and I can hear his smile. "But in all honesty, you know that I don't need the sun as long as I have you, right?"

"Really?"

His hands stroke the length of my hair. "Slither, you gave me the sun when you walked into the manor. I don't need sunlight to feel warmth and happiness. I just need you."

And even later that night when I surprise him with a party to celebrate the end of his curse, complete with a sun themed cake, dancing, yellow drinks ,his favorite foods and a surprise visit from his mother, he doesn't spout his love for the sun in his speech, but his love for me.

And when we're lying in bed afterward, his arms warm against my back, his chest beneath my ear, and our feet tangled together, it's me that he whispers sweet nothings to.

"Have I ever said thank you for taking one last chance to run from my brother?" he whispers, his fingers gliding along the seven scars on the inside of my forearm.

"No."

"Thank you for running, Little Wolf. If it weren't for that, I wouldn't have you now."

I lift my head and kiss him, perfectly content. “Thank you for being cursed so you couldn’t run away from me,” I tease.

He squeezes me tight, kissing me sweetly, and when I fall asleep a while later, it’s with a smile on my face.

Four years ago, I became an indentured spy to the duke. Long story short, it was a bad time. But because of it, I stumbled onto a cursed manor and learned to trust others and myself. And now, this Little Wolf doesn’t need to run anymore.

Not unless she’s running home.

THE END

***

Want to see what's next in *The Poets of Once Upon a Time* series? Take a second look at those chapter titles…

***

**Subscribe to my newsletter and find me on social media if you want to stay in the loop:)**

GET THE GRINCH NEXT DOOR, A ROMCOM NOVELLA FREE WHEN YOU SIGN UP FOR MY NEWSLETTER
PLUS, GET SHORT STORIES, EXTRA SCENES + MORE!
SIGN UP NOW
Rachel E Stott

When you join my newsletter, you get my novella *The Grinch Next Door* for FREE! You also get access to short stories, extra scenes and more!

# Author's Note

Hello there, thank you for reading Alistair and Stella’s story!

I wanted to take a moment to tell you *why* I wrote this book. Thus far, every one of my books has initially been sparked by a daydream I had, a scene that came to life in my mind before I started writing on the page.

Every book except for this one.

When it came time for me to start writing my next story, I felt drawn to one specific idea: Characters whose stories are complicated, riddled with bad decisions that were motivated by desperation, but who find hope in the end.

I think in fiction we often find either perfect heroes who condemn violence and murder without first considering the situation, or morally grey heroes who don’t necessarily care if their actions are wrong so long as they get the desired outcome.

But what we so rarely get are heroes who make questionable choices in order to survive desperate situations but are still good people because they feel *guilty* for their choices. Unlike the morally grey hero who doesn’t care, or the upright hero who never compromises because they’re never put in a situation where they have to.

I wanted to write a story about characters like Kate and Sawyer from the TV show *Lost*. Characters with messy histories but hopeful futures. Characters who understand that sometimes the things we do aren’t good or evil, but the motivations we do them with are. Characters who learn to

forgive themselves and try to be better than they were yesterday. *Imperfect* characters who are still *good.*

And more than anything, I wanted to write a story that reminded people that life isn't black and white. It isn't cut and dried. Good people can do bad things. Good people can be desperate. Good people can screw up. And sometimes the right thing feels and looks wrong.

But regardless of what we've done to survive, or the selfishness we've leaned into, nothing, 'neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Romans 8:38 NLT)

So, if you take anything from this story, I pray that it's hope. Hope that one decision doesn't define you. Hope that life can get better. Hope that who you've been isn't who you have to be. And hope that no matter where you go or what you do, the God of the world will always love you. He's too stubborn not to.

Lots of love,

Rachel.

***

These characters were unexpected—this story was *not* on my list to write—but I'm so glad that they forced their way onto my calendar because I've fallen completely in love with them. I'm sad their story is over, but glad that it's out in the world! And if you're hoping to find out what happens for

some of the other characters from this story, keep on the lookout because I've got *plans* ;)

And for those of you who like short stories starring characters you know, extra chapters, and fun behind the scenes things, you can always check out the newsletter! And if you're interested in chatting with other readers (or me), you can follow my Instagram page and YouTube channel. Or if you just care about the books, that's fine too! I'll see you in the next one!

Thank you for reading,

Rachel

# Also by Rachel E Scott

## Urban Fantasy

A Tale of Ribbons + Claws

*Stale-Mate*

*Bond-Mate*

*Check-Mate*

***

Plot Twist

*Bonding With the Bodyguard coming 2025*

***

Legends of Avalon

*Legends of Avalon: Merlin*

*Legends of Avalon: Arthur*

***

## Fairytale Retellings

The Poets of Once Upon a Time

*Run Little Wolf*

***

## Romantic Comedies

*The Grinch Next Door*

***

## Fantasy

Welcome to Autumnvale

*Book One Coming Autumn of 2024*

***

## For Writing Tools Such as The Writing Bible

*RachelEScott.com*

# Acknowledgments

I seriously considered just using the same acknowledgments as last time since my support system hasn't changed. But those of you who are there for me deserve a fresh page.

First and foremost is potentially the corniest, but I don't care, I want to thank God for this gift He's given me. I've recently learned that not everyone talks to made up people all day, and when some people say they're not thinking anything, they mean it. I've never been so grateful to be strange, because this strangeness has given me the greatest joy and the ability to show God's love through the stories I write.

To my parents, who have supported me emotionally, financially, and with the space I needed to try my hand at taking this love of writing and turning it into a job. My life would be so empty without the two of you, and your constant cheerleading means the world to me.

Thank you to the friends who gave me sanity and continued to love me even when I sent you thirty-minute voice memos. Beth, Melody, Jennie, you mean more to me than I think you'll ever know, and I hope I can support you the way you've supported me. Austin, Drew, Emily, Tiffani, Penny, Abby, Baylie, thank you for making me feel loved. And to everyone else who has reached out to me and supported me, encouraged me, video chatted with me, or sent me funny reels to cheer me up, I love you and I'm grateful for you.

To my fur babies, Marshall Moose and Daisy Mae, I love you and I would **not** be here without you. You're my sanity and my joy and I love you more than people.

Lastly, thank **you** dear reader! Being an author means putting your creative work out for the world to criticize. It's incredibly vulnerable, especially for someone who puts as much of herself into her books as I do. So it means a lot that you chose to read my book. If you liked it, I would encourage you to review it (especially on Amazon) as reviews (particularly the number of them) greatly impacts how well books sell. And your girl's gotta eat.

But regardless of whether or not you review the book, I'm so glad you're here and I hope you liked Stella and Alistair.

Until next time,

Rachel

Rachel is an author of both contemporary and fantasy stories. She's a *The Office* enthusiast, a *The Lord of the Rings* superfan, and a sucker for all things geek. She reads anything with some clean romance—bonus points if there's some snarky MCs, funny side characters, and a happy ending. Rachel is dog obsessed, and two of her series even include her dogs (Daisy Mae appears in *A Tale of Ribbons & Claws* and Marshall is in *Legends of Avalon*). This hobbit author and her dogs spend lots of time writing, hanging out outside, and of course, watching *The Office*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*.

## Where to Find Me

Website: rachelescott.com

Instagram: @the.rachel.e.scott

YouTube: Rachel E Scott

Newsletter (and FREE eBook): sign up here

Follow me on Amazon

Facebook Group: Rachel's Party Planning Committee